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So You Want to Live the SLOW LIFE?

A Guide to Life in the Beastly Wilds

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So You Want to Live the Slow Life? A Guide to Life in the Beastly Wilds,
Volume 3

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The Tantalizing Aroma of Strawberry Jam

A few days had passed since my parents' visit, and today, I found myself at the supermarket with Kon. Naturally, we were armed with a shopping list. Or more like *one* shopping item.

It had all started when Rei mentioned that it was around the time of year when outdoor-grown strawberries would start lining up on the shelves. To obtain these delightful red gems, we had borrowed Rei's van and made our way here to accomplish our grocery mission. I was the one driving, of course.

Normally, after a move, one should pay a visit to the local government office to update the address printed on their driver's license—after all, the Japanese government is infamous for how we do everything on paper—but I hadn't managed that. Apparently, there was no office here that processed such administrative tasks for humans.

According to Techii, driving licenses were apparently considered as "Shiny and nice but not all that necessary" in the Wilds. As a law-abiding citizen, I had thought, *Erm, I know this place is an autonomous region and all, but is that really okay?* But in a place like this, I couldn't exactly avoid driving completely, so I'd driven as carefully as possible on the way here.

We were buying in bulk today, so we went for the shopping carts, not the baskets. Kon made full use of the child seat attached to the cart, perching there happily and adorably as he hummed a tune to himself.



“*Strawberry, strawberry*, cramming my belly with strawberry jam until I’m berry full!” Then, his large eyes widened as if something had suddenly occurred to him, and he tossed a question in my direction, “I should’ve asked earlier! Mikura, you keep talking about *out-jaw* grown, but what does that mean?”

“Well,” I answered as I slowly pushed the cart, “it’s actually *outdoor*-grown, which means growing vegetables and fruits on open land, under the sun and in fresh air. Basically, it’s plants grown outside greenhouses or other kinds of coverings. Supermarkets start stocking up on strawberries starting from winter due to the demand during festivities like Christmas, since it isn’t a Japanese Christmas without strawberry sponge cake.

“But the problem is that, unfortunately,” I sighed, “all of those are greenhouse-grown stuff. The fuels keeping greenhouses warm are a costly investment, which means that the strawberries gain a higher price tag as well. Outdoor-grown produce doesn’t require fuel, so it’s cheaper in comparison. You need piles of fruit to make jam, so it’s more cost-efficient to make them when outdoor-grown strawberries are in season. In fact, people who love strawberry jam would beaver away during this time of year, making an entire year’s worth of jam in the span of months.”

“Oooh! I see, I see!” he chirped. “Hey, do the two types of strawberries taste different too?”

I hummed in thought. “It’s apparently different, but it’s never been a problem for me, I guess. They say that greenhouse-grown strawberries are regular in taste and size, because the temperature is regulated. Outdoor-grown ones, meanwhile, come in a wide range and are quite different from one to another.” I shrugged. “Not that it really matters when you’re making jam, because you’re going to mix all of that together into a mush, so yeah.”

“I get it now! So the *out-jaw* ones are perfect for jam!”

“Yep.” I nodded with a smile. “If you go to rest stops or farmers markets, you’d sometimes find them selling strawberries that haven’t been sorted for size and minor defects, and I’d go as far as to say that these are jam strawberries. They haven’t been sorted, so they’re cheaper, and who cares about the range of size and taste when it’s all averaged out in jam?”

After a pause, I continued, “I don’t know whether there are rest stops in the Wilds or whether they operate the same way as ours, but if there are, I’d definitely like to stop by sometime. The official name for the rest stops I’m familiar with are ‘Roadside Stations,’ and they don’t just serve as rest areas during a long drive. They provide information to tourists, have souvenir shops that promote local products, and even fresh produce straight from farmers. They’re all unique, and I can really feel the local vibes there.”

“Rest stops, huh?” Kon started swinging his legs, which were jutting out from the child seat. “I dunno much about that stuff.” He then started humming a merry tune, and the music offered me pleasant company as I advanced on to the fruits section.

I immediately found what I was looking for. “There it is! Why hello there, outdoor-grown strawberries.” I reached out toward the column of white, stacked-up cardboard boxes.

Each box contained four packs of strawberries, and I moved one box onto the lower tray of the cart before stacking another on top of that. The third box quickly followed, and it seemed that I was running out of space, so the fourth went into the upper basket instead. The cart baskets for this supermarket were quite impressive in size—large enough to fit the boxes I was cramming onto it, which I was very thankful for.

I figured I could fit a few more layers inside the basket, and I got to a grand total of four stacks before I decided we had enough. As I moved toward the checkout counter, I supported the tower with one hand so that it wouldn’t collapse and ruin all my efforts.

“Mikura!” Kon cried, his big eyes growing wide with shock as he turned to me. “That’s too many! *Waaay* too many!”

“Huh?” I blinked in surprise. “Uh, no, this is only our first round. We haven’t even gotten started.”

“*Whaaat?!?*”

While that scream of terror played out in the background, I pushed my cart in front of the counter. Customers like me seemed to be a regular encounter for the cashier, who lifted the scanner and, with practiced ease, swiftly swept it

over the barcodes located on the side of the boxes. The ensuing payment process went without a hitch.

Next up was pushing the cart to the van. Once we arrived, I carefully stacked up the boxes inside the load space. After every box was tucked in snugly, we headed back into the supermarket again. Rinse and repeat for three more cycles.

When I finished loading the strawberries at the end of the fourth cycle, I started wondering, *Well now, should I go for another round?* I peered into the van, then into my wallet, and came to a conclusion. *I suppose that's enough for today.* I nodded to myself.

Now that the shopping was done, I pushed the cart into the cart return area of the parking lot. Before I pushed the cart into the line, however, there was one little passenger I had to take care of. I lifted Kon with both hands and steadily lowered him onto the ground.

When his tiny feet touched the ground, he started waving his arms frantically. "I-I never thought you'd buy so many strawberries! Even if you eat a whole lot every day, that mountain won't get smaller!"

"Haha," I chuckled at the sight as I pushed the cart into the line. "You see, the water content inside the strawberries goes away when I turn them into jam, so there won't be as much as it looks. And finishing that pile by eating them every day isn't something I would recommend... Strawberries start going bad after two or three days, so if we were having them as they are, we'll need to finish them by tomorrow.

"These fruits have a short shelf life," I continued while we headed back to the van. "So they're hard to get your hands on when they are out of season. But if you turn them into jam while sealing and sterilizing them properly, you can enjoy the taste and fragrance of strawberries whenever you like. That's the good thing about preserves."

"Ooooh, I see." He nodded solemnly. "They'll get bad and all mushy, yeah. I was thinking I could buy loads of them when I saved up enough money, but you're right. I need to remember that things go bad when I do shopping."

"Exactly. And once you purchase something, it's best to think about whether

you want to eat them while they're still tasty, or process them so that they'll last, by cooking them or turning them into preserves. The simple act of heating ingredients is enough to prolong their shelf life. Even if you don't go as far as to seal and sterilize them, turning them into compote already makes a huge difference."

"That's so interesting! Looks like I'll need to watch out for stuff like that when I start living on my own, huh?"

Arriving at the van, the first thing I did was help Kon into the toddler car seat installed on the front passenger seat. Chipmunk beastchildren, I heard, retained their tiny form for a significant number of years, which meant that toddler car seats were installed in every single household without exception. The harness attached was sturdier than the ones I'd seen on the other side of the border, and there was even a restraining bar that held his body down like one you'd see on a roller coaster. Once everything was in place and keeping him safe, Kon gripped the bar with his tiny paws in an almost practiced motion.

I closed the door, made my way to the driver's seat, and climbed in. There was a roar as I started the engine. After checking our surroundings thoroughly, I slowly set the van in motion.

My little companion, in his excitement, cheered, "Woohoo! I can almost taste the strawberry with how it smells in here! Mmm, I can't wait to have that yummy, tasty strawberry jam!"

The drive back was performed carefully at a leisurely pace. I was certainly in good company. Once we got home, I parked the van near the veranda and released Kon from his restraints before unloading our large pile of boxes onto the veranda deck.

With that task out of the way, I went off to wash my hands to keep germs at bay. And now, it was time to dive into the main event!

I rolled up my sleeves, donned my apron, and lined up as many boxes as the kitchen counter could fit. Our strawberry packs came with a thin, transparent sheet of plastic covering the fruit in the hard plastic packs, and I tore these off. I then carried a large plastic bowl into the sink and made preparations for washing the fruits.

Kon, who had settled down in his usual seat, spoke up. “Hey, Mikura! Mommy always puts heaps of salt into her water when she washes her strawberries. Aren’t you gonna do that?”

“Ah, well...” I fell silent for a while, searching for the right words. “Everyone will give you a different answer for the best way to wash strawberries. Some people say salt water is supreme, some say it’s bad for you, and I’ll be honest, it’s hard to judge which side is right. Even if you ask the farmers, who’re supposed to be the experts, they’ll give you conflicting opinions too.

“So...yeah,” I said lamely. “Personally, I think giving them a thorough wash with water is enough. In the case of jam, we’re going to cook them for a long time, so unless there is something incredibly wrong with our batch, it should be safe to eat. Plus, if any of the salt’s left on the strawberry’s surface, it might affect the taste.”

Kon propped up his chin with his paw. “Huuuh... What are you gonna do about the stems?”

“There are just as many differing opinions floating around about the optimal time to remove stems, but I usually remove them during the washing process. You’ll see what I mean.”

Preparing the strawberries is a bit of a monotonous process. You fill the bowl with water and tip the strawberries in. Thus, the cycle begins: reach for a pack, push the fruits in, then toss the empty trays into the recycling bag. When the bowl is nice and full, stir the contents gently with your hand, and be careful not to bruise your nice fruit.

After a short while of stirring, take out an enamel pot for jam-making. You’ll want to process your strawberries one by one—hull it, put it back into the water, and give it a thorough wash around the stem area. Finally, you can place the clean strawberry into the pot. And now, repeat this process until you get through all the strawberries inside the bowl and your pot’s full.

I did exactly that, and I was ready to get to work. In my mind, I went over the recipe first, just in case.

I think we should all be pretty familiar with the rest of the recipe—it’s the same as last time. Add a generous amount of sugar and gently simmer, careful

not to burn the mixture. Once it boils, add a tiny amount of lemon juice and simmer on. Make sure to stir it regularly with a wooden spatula.

As the mixture cooks, foamy scum will appear on the surface. Personally, I leave it there. To remove, or not to remove, that is yet another controversial question. Some say that the scum would affect the texture or give it an acrid taste, but I've never noticed that with any of my batches, so it should be fine to leave them alone.

Some people also perform a jam test to check whether it's done. The method I have heard of is dripping a small amount into water and seeing whether it spreads or sinks. If it does the latter, it's ready. But, well...I've never done that, either. I boil the mixture until it gains a jam-like consistency and do a taste test. If no problem arises, it's good enough.

When ready, fill sterile jars with hot jam. Pasteurize by boiling the jars, then make the vacuum seal. There are several ways of creating the vacuum seal—to my knowledge, the most popular method is boiling the jars and screwing them open for a brief period to allow the expanding air to escape. Once it cools, the air will contract and perform its magic.

However, I'd sometimes come across cookbooks that said turning the jar upside down is good enough. I was utterly clueless about how something like that could create a vacuum, but I supposed people had their reasons, just like the other steps I had mentioned before.

The science of it all was beyond me, but at any rate, the *fwoosh* sound of air rushing out feels like an “all clear” sign telling me it's ready, and I love it. That was why I subscribed to the screw method.

I wondered why there were so many different methods for each step. *Maybe the process is easy to experiment with? It might take time, but the recipe isn't all that difficult, and perhaps each household ended up developing their own unique style. Or maybe different strawberry varieties call for a different process.*

Realizing my mind was wandering off on a very long tangent, I steered my thoughts back on track. With both hands, I lifted the pot—filled with strawberries, sugar, and a wooden spatula jutting out—and called out to my lone spectator. “Let's move over to the living room, shall we? We've got a lot to

boil today, so let's entertain ourselves with some TV while we cook it." With a wry smile, I continued, "With how much we bought, we might have to make another batch tomorrow, but thanks to our wonderful helper, Miss Tech, we have plenty of time to spare. No rush."

Kon replied with an energetic, "Okaaaay!" before he stood up from his chair and navigated back onto the ground like an acrobat, nimbly hopping onto drawer handles and other makeshift platforms as he went. Like a little rocket, he darted into the living room with a light, rhythmical pitter-patter of feet. He took out floor cushions for himself and me, then switched on the TV with the press of a button on the remote before proceeding to change the channel to a kids' show he liked.

I wasn't complaining. Though they were labeled kids' shows, I found that viewing them with an adult lens was rather interesting—actually, the content itself was entertaining to people of any age. Not to mention that off-screen, Kon would stare at the TV with bright eyes, and how could that ever get dull?

"Thanks for taking out the floor cushions," I said, lowering the pot onto the portable stove I had set up on the low table. "Ah, right, feel free to grab a packet of snacks from the snack cabinet, but only one, okay? I have my hands full today, so I probably won't have time to make tea, so you can have a bottle of juice, too. Just one."

Kon's eyes glinted like a hawk that had found its prey, and his ears twitched. Before I could even blink, there were several rapid thuds as he sprinted into the kitchen as if his life depended on it. Then came the rustling of rummaging paws as he perused the extensive gallery of snacks stored inside the snack cabinet. He gingerly picked out a packet of chocolate chip cookies. Next, he hopped over to the cardboard box area in one corner of the kitchen and fished out a bottle of fizzy lemonade. He had to make several trips back and forth from the kitchen to the living room, since he couldn't carry all of that with his petite frame.

In the end, Kon's haul was as follows: one packet of chocolate chip cookies—as promised—two bottles of fizzy lemonade for the both of us, and a small cup for himself. I accepted the beverage and voiced my warm thanks.

"You're very welcome!" he chirped, eyes squeezed shut like always and a big

grin on his face. Then, an apologetic frown overtook his features as he hesitantly held out his bottle of lemonade to me.

The plastic cap must be a challenge for his small hands. I nodded with a smile, accepted it, and twisted it open. I poured a small amount of the liquid into the tiny cup he was holding up.

“Thanks, Mikura!” he said happily.

“You’re also very welcome,” I replied.

He helped himself to the cup and savored the popping sensation of bubbles against his tongue. He took small sips, as if every drop was worth its weight in gold. His eyes were fixed on the lemonade as he drank, but soon, the lively sounds from the TV began to steal his attention, and he started taking furtive glances at it.

As for me, I watched Kon out of the corner of my eye as I lit the stove and adjusted it to medium heat. Soon, the sweet scent of sugar and the tantalizing aroma of the strawberries wafted out from the pot, and I happily relished in it.

The strawberry jam was officially underway, and the delightful fragrance filled the entire living room. Of course, the more strawberries one used, the stronger the scent, and I certainly had a large batch cooking. The unique sweet and sour scent of the fruits was layered with additional sweetness from the sugar, and I could almost taste a saccharine hint in my mouth with the smell alone.

As the pot continued to simmer, Kon eventually began taking longer turns staring at the pot than the TV. He couldn’t peer into the pot from his position on the floor cushion, so he climbed onto the low table for a better view. His staring was almost audible, and I spotted him wiping drool from his mouth.

This was his second time watching me make jam, and his previous experience showed in his little song. “I love strawberry! You love strawberry! We all love the sweet and sour strawberry jam!” He had to sing the song between loud gulps as he swallowed the building drool in his mouth.

I quirked an eyebrow at the little guy and made a decision. I stood up, headed to the kitchen, and fetched two small plates and teaspoons. With the wooden spatula, I scooped up two chunks of strawberry that had still mostly retained

their shapes and gently transferred them onto the two plates.

“Shall we do a taste test?” I grinned.

Kon’s eyes lit up like the sun and a wide smile overtook his mouth. He blew on the steaming strawberry with all his might, huffing and puffing adorably. Once it had cooled sufficiently, he scooped the fruit into his mouth, and his smile became the brightest thing in the room.

I followed his example and tasted the strawberry. *Mmm. Sweet, tangy, and has the texture of the fleshy fruit as well. I did a good job. Just a little bit more simmering and it’ll be golden.* I heated the mixture for another few minutes before pouring the finished jam into a jar, which I’d sterilized with alcohol.

Nodding to myself, I said, “We’ll boil all the jam jars together, so let’s put it aside for now. Our biggest mission is to simmer, simmer, and simmer some more.”

I turned into a jam-making machine as I repeated the process over and over again: washing and hulling the strawberries, simmering the sugar, fruit, and lemon juice mixture, and finally taste-testing one piece of strawberry at the end of every batch.

As I worked, I snuck out time to do other things as well. Eating lunch, sipping lemonade, going to the bathroom, enjoying a variety of TV shows, and so on. Time went by in a flash, and when I looked out at the veranda, I realized the orange tint of twilight was painting over the sky. The hands on the clock indicated a time that was on the brink of evening.

“Ah, look at the time,” I muttered absentmindedly. “Looks like we really have to make more jam tomorrow to get through all our strawberries. I guess it’s not a bad thing, though. I have a long list of people I want to gift, and doing lengthy bulk cooking is pretty fun. Can’t complain about the time I invest.”

“Hey, Kon,” I said as I poured the pot of jam fresh off the stove into a jar, “I think it’s about time you get ready to go home.”

Kon was sitting on his little countertop chair when he heard that. His ears fell flat against his head, and his tail wilted like a flower as he stared at me with his large, chipmunk eyes that spoke volumes. I tried to decipher them—was he

reluctant to go home, or did he want to at least have a taste of the final jam before he went? Upon further inspection, I decided, *It's the latter all right.*

He had been in the presence of the jam's irresistible aroma all day long, so I couldn't fault him for his reaction. With a knowing smile, I finished filling up my last jar and peered into the enamel pot. The jar was literally jam-packed, but there was still plenty of jam left in the pot.

I'd love to share this with him, but it's nearing dinnertime, and having too much won't be good for a growing boy. Hmm, what should I do?

My thought process was interrupted by the sound of footsteps—*many* footsteps, in fact—from the garden. My ears even picked up the lively chatter of a group of children, and that got my curiosity going. I left the pot on the stove and walked out onto the veranda. Guess who I found there? It was Techī, and she had a group of children in tow.

The moment Techī spotted me, she folded her arms and said, “There should be a limit to how much jam you make in a day, Mikura. We could even smell it from the orchard.”

I blinked in surprise and glanced over at the orchard before tilting my head quizzically. “I know that making jam has a strong smell, but isn't the orchard a little too far away?”

“That may be the case for humans, but the noses of us beastfolk are more sensitive than yours,” Techī explained.

“I see...” I nodded. Out of the corner of my eyes, I realized that the kids were drooling as they fixed their eyes on me, and I shook my head with a small smile. I inhaled and shouted, “Wash your hands first, everyone! I'll prepare the jam while all of you do that, so make sure to scrub your paws until they're nice and clean!”

The kids took that as a “Yes” to their silent plea and broke out with loud cheers. Techī sported a wry smile, as if to say, “Kids will be kids.” Under her lead, they poured into my house like an avalanche and crowded inside the bathroom. While cheery laughter and the splashing of water resounded in the background, I wrestled with the problem of what to do next.

Eating jam plain sounded like a “good” way to squander the beautiful preserve, but allowing the kids to eat bread moments before dinner really wasn’t a responsible idea. Even if I did go with that plan, my house certainly didn’t have enough bread to feed nearly twenty of these eager little ones.

Well, I’m stuck. What should I do?

I wondered whether there was something light and small they could snack on. And that was when an idea came to me. I made my way to the snack cabinet and searched around. Finally, I had found what I’d been thinking of: crackers that you’d normally eat with cheese or other condiments.

Kon had been watching over me like a hawk right by my side, and the moment he saw the packaging, he raised his voice in delight. “That looks soooo yummy!”

I gave him a nod and an approving smile. Then, with my little assistant’s help, we prepared for our jam party. We arranged the low table and the guest table side-by-side and laid out the appropriate number of small plates on the surface. One cracker went on every plate, and a spoonful of fresh jam decorated each one.

As for drinks, there were too many guests for us to prepare anything complicated, so I had to settle for water. The cups that lined the table also varied in shape and size, but there wasn’t much I could do about that either. I was also short on floor cushions, which meant that I had to compromise once again. In the end, the living room was transformed into a rather crude party venue.

Almost as if they’d rehearsed it, the kids galloped in just as we finished up. One after another, they sat down obediently in front of the plates. Kon joined the crowd and found a spot for himself as well, and many pairs of expectant gazes convened on Techī, who stood next to me.

Faced with such a sight, Techī scanned the party venue quickly to check that everyone was present, and that everyone had their own share of jam and crackers. She then clapped her hands together, and all the kids followed. Techī voiced her thanks for the food, and a chorus of the same phrase echoed out.

That was the cue for the transformation—the party venue was taken over by

the smiles and laughter of the kids. All of them reacted in their own unique way, and I could never get tired of watching this scene. The kids stared at the jam crackers and animatedly talked about how tasty it looked, how nice it smelled, how they were craving more, and some even whined that there was way too little. What they all had in common, however, was the radiant smiles that adorned their features.

Though they all looked similar in appearance, their individual personalities showed in their mannerisms. They all picked up the crackers in their own special manner, and there was just as much variety in how they went about eating the snacks. One plopped the entire thing into their mouth, while another took small nibbles, savoring the taste.

Their reactions after getting a taste were no less intriguing. Kon did his usual closed-eye smile, but some of the other kids beamed with their eyes wide. Some were happily sharing their thoughts with their friends, while others covered their mouths with both hands, as if they didn't want the delectable taste to escape. Then I spotted the ones raising their hands in the air in elation, as well as the kids that were moved to tears by the taste.

Once everyone finished indulging in their cracker and their mouths were no longer busy chewing, there was an explosion of noise as the kids all broke into boisterous chatter with a fervor I'd never seen from them before.

I glanced to the side. Techī watched over them with a warm, tender smile that was just as rare and precious. For a while after that, we both watched over the energetic munchkins until the excitement finally died down.

Every party must come to an end. It was soon time to go home, and just like last time, their parents came to fetch their lovely children, who definitely had a new story to share.



THE day after the cracker party went by in a blur—yet another day of monotonous jam-making. You'd think I'd be released from my work on the day following that, but no. Today, I went off to shop once again and was beavering away, producing strawberry jam.

That might leave one wondering—shouldn't I have enough jam already? That,

unfortunately, was not the case. The kids who had missed out on the jam party—the kids who hadn't been on duty that day—wanted to have some too. Even the kids that already had some wanted seconds. In fact, they'd even declared that they wanted to buy whole jars from me.

And...who was I to say no to all their expectant gazes? Thus, the third day of jam-making was underway.

The kids' parents had offered to pay me a commission fee. But if I were to sell my wares as commercial products, I'd need to go through a whole lot of official procedures, such as a food safety inspection. Thus, I'd only asked them to pay me the material costs under two conditions: they would eat the jam at their own risk and eat it as soon as possible, because I couldn't give them an accurate best-before date.

Some of the parents had even asked for the recipe, which had put me in a bit of an awkward spot, because there wasn't much of one. I only chunked in sugar, lemon juice, and fruit before simmering it. I didn't even have an accurate measure of the amount of each ingredient, since I adjusted all that based on my intuition. Drafting up a recipe to produce the same results, therefore, was out of the question, so I could only apologize and politely decline.

Back to the present, it was the cusp of evening when I finished all the jam work for the day. The sealed jars were safely tucked away in the fridge, and all that was left now was cleanup.

Kon was perched in his usual spot as I washed the cookware. "I think all this strawberry is starting to get dull. I'm smelling strawberry day in, strawberry day out!"

I meticulously scrubbed the pot, taking care not to damage the coating as I replied, "Same here. There's still a lot more variety of strawberry preserves, but I guess I'll have to leave it for next year."

"There's even *more?!'*" Kon gasped, his eyes wide as saucers. "It's not just jam?!"

"Certainly not." Though I spoke, I was fully focused on the task at hand. "More than you can ever dream of. Some examples would include drying them, simply freezing them, or turning them into sauce. Other than that, well, you

could even make alcohol with them.” I paused, trailing off in thought. “Oh, strawberry butter is a decent choice too. In terms of taste, it won’t be too different from the ones they sell in the supermarket, but handmade fruit butter has a stronger fragrance, so it’s worth the effort in my opinion.”

“*Reeeally?! Wow, there’re so many!*”

“Sure are,” I replied absentmindedly. “But with how much strawberry jam we’ve got, we have plenty of strawberry preserves to enjoy already, so let’s leave the rest for a later date.”

Kon hummed in thought. “Good point. I can’t drink *alco-hall*, and strawberry jam sounds waaay nicer than butter, so I think we made the right choice!” As he spoke, he started waving his dangling legs. And then, he started fidgeting, as if he wanted to say something, but wasn’t quite sure how to bring it up.

By now, I’d finished washing the pot and was moving it onto the dish rack. In a no-nonsense tone, I said firmly, “You are not having any alcohol, and that’s final.”

The little guy started shaking his head profusely, so vigorously that he was practically leaving afterimages in his wake. After a lengthy head-waving session, he replied, “No no no no, that’s not what I mean! I’m just, um, wondering whether we’ll get to eat meat again!”

I blinked. “Meat,” I repeated dumbly.

“Yeah. I mean, you made meat with the marmalade last time!” He gestured frantically.

“Ahhh, I see.” I gave him an awkward smile. “Unfortunately, strawberry jam doesn’t go that well with meat. It won’t produce marvelous results like the marmalade would.”

“Then...is there anything else? You know, yummy meat *pruh-zurves!*”

“Yummy meat, huh?” I broke off in thought before an idea came to me. “It’s not exactly a preserve, but there’s something I do want to try out. Making my own unique herb sausages.”

“SAUSAGES!” His eyes lit up. Then, he tilted his head, puzzled. “Wait...

Sausages aren't *pruh-zerves*? But in the movies, they take them on long journeys and hang them up on the wall."

"Oh, that." After a moment of pondering, I decided to give him a lecture on sausages. "You're very knowledgeable, Kon. There are two main categories of sausages: fresh or preserved. Some sausages are preserves, like the hanging ones you mentioned, especially overseas. But in Japan, most of our sausages are fresh—the ones you find in supermarkets are typically stored in refrigerators or freezers. As for how that came to be, well, it's a long story.

"Sausage-making is a traditional food preservation technique that has existed for over thousands of years overseas. Eating them is a bit of a gamble, however, because there is a relatively significant risk of food poisoning. We only pinpointed the reason behind the so-called 'sausage disease' recently. The culprit is a bacteria called *Clostridium botulinum*—they got its name from the Latin word for sausage, *botulus*. It produces a dangerous toxin that causes botulism—the poisoning—and Japan once placed extremely strict regulations on such products. These were only loosened not too long ago."

In my mind, I went over the trivia I knew and explained it to Kon. We have been eating sausages for thousands of years for good reason—not all sausages cause botulism. If you work in a clean environment and follow the recipe responsibly, such as adding the right amount of salt and heating the product for one to two minutes at temperatures greater than 212°F, the product is safe to consume. That destroys the botulinum toxin and bacteria.

However, if heating isn't done properly, or if the maker doesn't follow an appropriate recipe, it's no different from playing with fire. I didn't know the details about what sausages were considered as overseas, but in Japan, they don't fall under the category of preserves...or at least, that was my opinion.

There *are* ways of preserving sausages, such as drying them or fermenting them, but I wouldn't recommend such methods in a country like Japan, since our climate here is hot and humid. Even if I *did* treat the botulinum properly, there's a high chance that they'll go off during that process.

I heard that a university somewhere is researching ways to make sausages with lactic acid bacteria fermentation, but apparently finding the right bacteria

that could produce a good flavor is a struggle, so it's an uphill battle. Perhaps one day, such sausages might become a common sight on supermarket shelves. But at the moment, the general impression of sausages is that they aren't really a preserve, even though some preserves do require refrigeration for storage and thorough cooking before consumption. To us, they're more like processed food.

"As far as I know, sausages aren't considered preserves in Japan," I concluded after the lengthy lecture. "But making your own sausages isn't risky at all, as long as you eat them quickly and cook them all the way through. There are a lot of things you can play around with, like testing out different combinations of meat and enjoying the texture or taste that produces, or relishing in the scent of spices and herbs, or even enjoying the distinct hints that various wood chips would leave after smoking.

"It doesn't last forever like a preserve, but it's still fun thinking that, 'Oh, this is a preserve recipe passed down by our ancestors. I wonder what theirs tasted like.'" I smiled. "That's what I thought during the past few days as I made jam."

Kon listened attentively all the while as I spoke. When I was done, I could almost see the little gears churning away inside his brain as he made every effort to digest what I had told him. Then, I spotted a trickle of drool down his chin—he must have thought back to the sausages he had eaten.

I grabbed the handkerchief nearby and wiped his face lightly. He wore a sheepish smile, but his stomach gave him away as it growled hungrily, craving a juicy, meaty sausage. Its message was very clear.

"Well then," I said, "how about I make some for you next time?"

As always, Kon shut his eyes in delight as he smiled from ear to ear. My heart melted, and my mind was set—I remembered I'd back-ordered a canning equipment set a while ago, and I was now going to add a sausage-making set to the list.

The Topic of Homemade Sausages

TIME passed by quickly after my promise with Kon, and it was soon night. Techii attended to her nightly routine after she came back from work—we both got a change of clothes, had dinner, and had our respective baths. Now, we were lounging away in the living room during the little free time we had before bedtime.

We laid out floor cushions and were slouching in our pajamas, enjoying cups of herbal tea—that were supposed to improve our sleep quality—as we chatted about what happened during the day. That was when I brought up the topic of making sausages at home. Techii listened patiently until I finished my whole speech, and by the end, I found her staring at me with half-lidded, slightly exasperated eyes.

“I mean,” she began, “do what you like with your money. When I took a look at your bank passbook, I saw that you were much more diligent about saving than I expected, so it isn’t much of a problem. It’s cheaper than the canning set, too, right? So I’m not complaining here. But I do have this to say—don’t start collecting new things at every opportunity just because you have the money. Remember that they will take up space. We’re both thinking about renovating the house, so don’t cram it to the brim, yeah?”

“Ah... You’re right.” My shoulders slumped slightly out of guilt. She was the voice of reason, and I listened obediently. “I will be careful, I swear. Sorry about that...”

Techii shook her head with a small sigh and a wry quirk of her lips. “That’s all right. Just keep it in mind, will you? By the way...” She hesitated. “About those homemade sausages you mentioned, do they taste good?”

“Huh? Yeah, I think so. Since we are making them ourselves, we don’t have to think too much about their shelf life or making them in bulk. That means our own products should be more flavorful than the ones they sell in stores. We still have plenty of boar meat left from your last hunt, and we can use that. Let’s

see... Some boar sausage with cartilage fragments sounds like a tasty treat. It'll be juicy and crunchy, and I could never say no to that."

Techi latched on to my last sentence immediately. "*Cartilage.*"

"Yep. Other than that, I suppose we could also consider throwing some cheese chunks into the mix."

"*Cheese.*"

I nodded. "Of course, we can't forget the classics: herbs, pepper, or chili pepper sausages. But since we are making them at home, I think it'd be fun to test out all kinds of ingredients. We could go for a dumpling-style sausage by mixing in shredded cabbage, or adding in onions to enhance its sweet flavor, or even throwing in some finely chopped bamboo shoots for that crunch."

"*Cabbage. Onion. Bamboo shoots.*"

For some reason, Techi was reduced to a parrot who could only repeat my words. Her face was schooled into a solemn expression I'd never seen on her before, and her eyes were glinting like a hawk. There was something hungry about her gaze—something fierce and unstoppable.

The ideas just kept coming. "Oh, there're a lot of fun things we can do with the taste, too," I said. "We could add some dashi stock to give it a Japanese flavor or some curry powder. Ah, consommé style or ketchup style would work too, if that's what you like."

Her eyes were practically glowing. "Dashi...curry powder..." she repeated slowly.

"Y-Yeah," I replied, a little taken aback. "Other than that, I think using different sausage casings is worth a thought too. The standard is using sheep intestines, but there are also artificial substitutes. Using a thick casing would give it a different texture when you bite into it, making it feel chunky rather than delicate and juicy.

"Apparently, you can make large sausages using cow or pig intestine casings, but the problem is that finding a supplier isn't all that easy. The reason for that, I hear, is the high maintenance they require. You have to import the heavily salted casings, wash them, sterilize them, then soak them in a saline solution

again before getting all the liquid out. So, as a novice, artificial casings are probably our best bet if we want to test something other than sheep.”

“Interesting... I see, so you can change the texture. Huh...” As she spoke, Techii shifted her sharp gaze to the veranda—or, to be more precise, the garden that was shrouded in darkness.

The humid air of the rainy season wafted in from that direction, and with it came the blaring sounds of insects, so loud that I almost jumped. The voices of nature here didn’t perturb me or obstruct me from getting a good night’s sleep, possibly because I’d grown used to it as a child. However, it wouldn’t be an overstatement to call it an uproar, and someone new to this environment might have a lot of trouble trying to get any sleep here. As if that wasn’t enough, there was even the hooting of owls, the noises of wild beasts, and the occasional howl of fighting animals, possibly boars. At times, the night felt even noisier than the orchard during the day, despite the latter being filled with lively kids.

As I made that quiet observation in my mind, Techii continued to stare at the garden. Finally, she said, “Deer.”

I blinked in surprise. “Y-Yes? What’s this about a deer?”

“It’s nothing. My mind just wandered to the taste of venison, though I haven’t had any recently. They’re not half bad. Like what your father said during his visit, it’s something you’d crave from time to time, and I just thought that they’d be good sausage meat. Bear meat has a rather strong gamey flavor, but that *does* make me curious about how it’d turn out in a sausage.”

“O-Oh, so that’s what you were lost in thought about. Well, I’ll try making some after the set arrives, but I can’t promise you anything about the taste for those two.” I looked at her with intrigue. “I have to say, I didn’t expect you to be so invested in the sausages before we even have any equipment ready.”

She pursed her lips slightly. “It’s on you for making them sound so good. I’m not the one to blame. I don’t know when it’ll arrive, but you better be ready to get busy once it does. This so-called set isn’t that expensive, right?”

“Yeah. I mean, there *are* some that cost a fortune if you get picky, but the simpler ones should be under 10,000 yen. Sheep intestines aren’t all that

expensive either, so the costliest component of the whole process is probably the meat that'll be the main ingredient."

"In that case, just like I thought, I should go hunt." She nodded to herself. "According to the bearfolk, there seems to be an overpopulation of wild animals inside the forest recently. We need to hunt plenty and eat plenty so that they don't invade our territory."

"Oh, is that how it works? Even on the other side of the border, wild animals cause problems as they wander into human settlements. I never knew it was the same case over here."

"If there are too many of them, there isn't enough food to go around. In their hunger, they will naturally end up at our settlements during their search. You hear all those stories about boars and bears rummaging through someone's fridge. I think I've said this before, but Tomiyasu would spray the area with animal repellent because he wanted to avoid that."

She paused. "On that thought, we should buy a new batch and spray the area again. We had that boar incident a while ago, and I've already found several boars in the vicinity. Maybe the previous repellent has already worn off. It doesn't come cheap, but compared to the amount of damage a wild beast can do to your property, it's a price I'm willing to pay. With that repellent in place and a few hunts, things should calm down for a while. We can store all the meat in the fridge or freezer of the warehouse, and you can work your magic on them in the kitchen."

Finally, Techī tore her gaze from the garden and looked back into the living room. She reached for the teacup on the low table and took a long sip. Then, there was a subdued rumble in her stomach. She was clearly hungry, possibly because of our talk of sausages and meat, and she looked at me with imploring eyes. However, I was firm as I shook my head in refusal. It would be unhealthy to add a meal at this time of night.

Instead, I poured more herbal tea into her cup with a big smile, as if to say, "You'll have to make do with that."

Techī gave me a reluctant nod as she lifted the full teacup to her lips.





THE next day was off to a slow start. I placed the order for the sausage-making set, finished the chores, and was now relaxing with a cup of tea in the living room. *Now then, should I head to the orchard about now to meet up with Tech and the kids?*

But before I could act on that thought, the roaring of a car engine reached my ears—it was Rei’s delivery van heading into the garden. Soon, the noise died down and the door swung open. Rei climbed out, plopped down on the veranda, and called out to me. “*Bonjour*, my good fellow! How’s it going with Tech?”

“Very well, I think,” I responded in kind. “We’re getting along, there are no quarrels, and our daily life is filled with smiles, Brother.”

Until now, I had treated him as an extension of Tech and one of my few good acquaintances in the Wilds. Now that both Tech and I had greeted each other’s families with the intention to get married, however, Rei was my family, and I addressed him accordingly.

Grinning ear to ear, Rei replied, “Now that’s what I’m talking about! I’m very pleased to have a great kid brother like you.” He paused as his tone turned serious. “That aside, let’s get down to business. Like we feared, renovations are gonna be a challenge.”

A while ago, we’d decided that we would renovate this house. However, it was apparently difficult in the Wilds—though there were carpenters and people working in the construction business, no one specialized in renovation. Rei had said he had a few carpenter friends, and he had offered to consult them about whether they could help me in this regard. Judging by his reaction, he didn’t have any luck.

That was what I had assumed until Rei, with a big smile on his face still, continued, “We beastfolk think that we should just rebuild the entire house rather than do a renovation here or there. We know of the concept, of course, through stuff like TV, but they said that they didn’t have the expertise, so they can’t give you an answer right away. They’re going to analyze whether this job is doable for them, take a look at this house, then give you a quote. It’ll take a

while.”

I did a double-take at him. “Wait. You just said that it’s going to be a challenge, so I assumed they rejected you outright. But...they’re willing to at least give me a quote?”

Rei’s smile grew even wider as he replied, “Of course. If they said no, you’d end up giving the job to people on the other side of the border, right? Think about what you’ve done so far for us. You formed a pact that was advantageous to my sister and the kids. You subscribed to the milk delivery service. Furthermore, when a bunch of thugs came barging in, you didn’t try to take their side or help them because you’re from the same place, but instead dealt with them accordingly.”

His list went on. “You gave all kinds of things to the kiddos, you became my sister’s fiancé... You’re putting so much effort into becoming one of the pack, and it’d be a disgrace if they decline and make you rely on the people on the other side. That’s why they are doing everything they can to fulfill your request.” His grin turned sheepish. “That being said, they don’t know whether they have the necessary skills as professionals, so they want to plan thoroughly before giving you a quote.”

“I mean, I’ll be honest, I was planning on doing it all by myself in the worst-case scenario,” I admitted. “I never thought about asking for help from beyond the border. That aside, I’m a bit surprised. How do I put it?” I hesitated. “The beastfolk seem more partial to me than I expected. I understand if we’re talking about the parents of the kids working at the orchard, but your carpenter friend isn’t, right?”

“Well, you’re a human at the end of the day.” He shrugged. “I can’t deny that some folks aren’t happy about that, but they’re the minority. Very few people, no matter what race they are, would look down on someone who’s working hard to fit in. Furthermore, you’re also kind of keeping a low profile—you never try heading into the deeper woods unless you’re going shopping, right? Because of that, there haven’t been any incidents, either. In fact, the supermarket really looks forward to your visits because you buy in bulk. They actually want you to visit more often.

“And of course,” he grinned impishly, “I think you’re a great neighbor and brother as well. A few days ago, you gave jam to the kids, yeah? Thanks to that, all the fruit desserts in my shop are selling like hotcakes. The type of dessert I’m talking about is something like a fruit pie, with fruit compote wrapped inside puff pastry. The kids are snatching them off the shelf, saying that they’re yummy like jam crackers. I only started selling them two days ago, but they’re already bringing in money, and I could never thank you enough.”

Two days... If memory served me right, I had treated the kids to jam crackers three days ago. That meant they visited Rei’s *pâtisserie* almost immediately after. Rei sold fruit hand pies in his shop, and his selection was huge. Strawberries, blueberries, cherries, peaches, and so on were simmered with sugar into a compote, which he wrapped in puff pastry.

Naturally, they were all made by *pâtissier* Rei. As a professional, he would have a much more respectable recipe for making the compote, such as a precise ratio of sugar. It would definitely taste better than my makeshift jam. *I see. So, my amateur homemade jam opened the kids’ eyes to how delectable cooked fruit can be, and they are frequenting a professional pâtisserie, eager to taste the same thing again, or something even better.*

Rei continued, “I even considered taking the leap and selling whole bottles of fruit compote, but I need more experience and training before I can dabble in something like that. Not much I can do about that, which is why I’m making several types of compote sweets to satisfy my customers. Jam and compote aren’t all that different—they’re simmered fruit, so it’s working.

“Like I said, you’re a great neighbor to have. Some of the cheeky little munchkins say, ‘Mikura’s jam is better!’” He then huffed exaggeratedly, but his eyes were shining with triumph and elation. “But I guess I can let that slide after seeing a sharp uptick in sales.”

There was a slight edge to his words, as if he had some strong opinions about my jam. Fortunately for me, he was willing to let it go thanks to how it helped with his sales.

I cleared my throat and changed the subject. “Um, back to the topic. Please tell the carpenters that I’m not in a rush, so they can plan for as long as they

want. As long as they contact me in advance, they're welcome to survey my house whenever they wish. I'm looking forward to working with them."

"Gotcha, will pass the message on." A thought seemed to occur to him. "Right, there was one more thing I wanted to ask you. There's a guy who heard that making preserves is your hobby, and he's intrigued. Can I bring him over next time? He's a raccoon dog beastman, and..." For some reason, Rei trailed off here. "Uh, he's an earnest and nice guy at any rate."

My eyes widened. *I can't believe I found someone with the same hobby! Someone who's interested in talking with me because we share the same hobby!*

Techi showed support for my interest, and Kon was fascinated too, even helping out from time to time. But they were more invested because their tummies were hooked, not because they liked the art itself. I would love to make a friend with the same, pure passion for the hobby. Rei was going out of his way to introduce the man, so he shouldn't be too eccentric.

Excited at the prospect of finding a fellow comrade, I smiled and replied, "That'd be wonderful."



A few days flew by after our conversation, and Saturday arrived. Since it was the weekend, Techι and Kon were going to join me during lunch. I'd obtained some fine masu salmon and salted cod roe in the supermarket, both excellent fillings for onigiri rice balls, so that was on the menu.

Masu salmon is an expensive, high-class fish that has a similar taste to standard salmon. The key difference is its sweetness, mild or almost undetectable fishy taste, and potent umami flavor. Some say that masu salmon reigns supreme in taste among all the trout and salmon species out there. It's often enjoyed as sashimi, but like salmon, its decadent taste is great as an onigiri filling. Meanwhile, salted cod roe is everywhere in Japanese cuisine since its strong fishy flavor is perfect with rice, pasta, or even as a snack with alcohol.

All recipes called for a preparation phase, which was what I was doing. Our fish was high-class, and it'd be a shame to ruin that with subpar ingredients. The rice was fresh out of the cooker, the salt was a slightly fancy one, and the dried nori seaweed was the canned type—the *expensive* type. Soon, freshly grilled

masu salmon and medium-done cod roe would go into that mixture, and I was already salivating at the thought. Now add a bowl of hot miso soup and some pickled daikon radish on the side, and it'd elevate the seemingly simple dish into a meal fit for a king.

I was cutting up the masu salmon fillet in the kitchen when I noticed something. "Hey, is it just me, or is this masu salmon rather big? It's also nice and fatty. It's identical to the biwa trout I had a long time ago."

Techi was in the middle of fetching some milk from the fridge as she asked, "Biwa trout? What's that?"

"They're an endemic species of masu salmon that can only be found in Lake Biwa. What sets them apart is their larger size and higher fat stores than the standard masu salmon. Basically, they're a luxurious fish that practically melts in your mouth with an exquisite taste."

Techi hummed in thought. "Well, I can tell you that most of the masu salmon we get around here are around that size."

"It's actually a little past the best season for normal masu salmon," I commented. "One of their other names is cherry trout, because we get the best ones in spring, when cherry blossoms bloom. Is it different in the Wilds?"

"I've never paid that much attention to when exactly something's in season, but..." Techi paused. "You might be right. They usually start showing up in markets around this time of year."

Huh. All the wild animals they have around here seem to be bigger. First the boars, then their masu salmon. Interesting. Though my mind wandered a little, my hands were still very much focused on the task.

Preparing the onigiri filling is simple. Cut the masu salmon fillet into bite-size chunks. Place the chunks on a fish grill on the stove and turn on the gas. Hygiene is important, so be sure to wash your hands before moving on to the next ingredient.

Chop the salted cod roe into small pieces. Spread it out on aluminum foil and place it in a toaster oven. Watch the cod roe carefully—make sure it doesn't overcook. Once it's around medium done, take it out immediately and transfer it

to a plate. When the masu salmon is golden brown and cooked through, do the same.

Now, you're ready to make the onigiri. Dip your hands in ice water to cool them, shake off the water, then scoop the hot rice onto your palm. The first step is to clump the rice together into a loose ball. You have to be fast so that you don't burn yourself—toss the rice into the air, catch it with the other hand, and repeat this motion. You can also think of it as “rolling” the clump in the air. Try to keep the rice moving as much as possible as you slowly adjust its shape.

Next, place the filling—the masu salmon or cod roe—you prepared into the center of the clump. This time, put more attention into shaping it properly. A triangle with rounded corners will never go wrong. Sprinkle on a pinch of salt. Wrap the finished product with the fancy and crispy nori seaweed, and you're done.

So that the rice wouldn't get cold, I was swift as I worked on the onigiri in the kitchen. Though cold onigiri *can* taste good too, warm, freshly made onigiri are a delight. I made two onigiri for each person—respective pairs of masu salmon and cod roe—and that came to a total of six.

I placed them on a plate when I was done and carried them to the living room. Next, I ladled out miso soup—which I'd heated up beforehand—into bowls and arranged pickled daikon radish onto small appetizer plates. *Done!*

I called for Techii and Kon, and we soon surrounded the low table, nestled in our usual spots. Together, we voiced our thanks for the food.

Almost instantly, we reached for our onigiri. The scent of the dried seaweed and the freshly cooked rice blended into a mouthwatering aroma that I basked in. Opening my mouth wide, I took a big bite out of my onigiri.

The taste of sweet rice and crunchy seaweed was pure bliss that only got better with each swallow. Eventually, I arrived at the center, where the fatty masu salmon was hiding. Its dominant taste complemented the rice perfectly, and I found myself at a loss for words. The only way I could describe it was “way too delicious.” I slowly savored the divine onigiri.

Techii spoke up after her first bite. “I never knew onigiri could be this heavenly. I mean, it's not that I ever thought they were bad or anything, but

they never really stood out to me. It's hard to believe that eating them fresh makes such a big difference."

"I'm honestly not that surprised by your reaction," I said. "We often eat onigiri as a packed lunch or buy them cold from convenience stores, since they're easy to carry around and are still decent chilled. That means we nearly never get to eat them warm and fresh. As you can see, with fine ingredients, fine seaweed, and hot rice from the cooker, onigiri can instantly transform into a wonderful explosion of flavor and texture."

I smiled as I added, "As long as you can endure handling the steaming rice, that is. I end up craving a full-on onigiri once or twice a month, pairing them with whatever ingredient is in season."

Hearing that, Techii drank her miso soup in silence, munched on some pickled daikon radish, then returned to taking bites out of her onigiri. Meanwhile, I polished off my masu salmon onigiri and reached for the medium-done cod roe onigiri.

There are many good filling choices for onigiri, like umeboshi or okaka—katsuobushi with soy sauce—or salmon or masu salmon, but in my opinion, medium-done cod roe of good quality is one of the best. The distinct fishy taste and umami of cod roe was enhanced by the grilling process, and I chewed with fervor, lost in the texture and flavor.

Soon, I finished my second onigiri, and I sipped some miso soup to refresh my taste buds before munching on some pickled daikon radish. I rubbed my happy belly, full of rice, and let out a contented sigh.

Our peaceful lunch was disrupted by a sudden voice from the veranda. "Well, look at that! Ya certainly have some delish grub there. Nothin' like a good meal to brighten up yer day. Now yer makin' me hungry."

The voice sounded like an older man, possibly in his forties, due to the distinct rough quality that came from years of drinking. I glanced over. There was a raccoon dog that was a tad bigger than Kon, but still small compared to a human. He sat with one leg propped up casually, and he wore traditional Japanese monk's working clothes in the color of indigo blue. His head and limbs, covered in thick fur, clearly belonged on a raccoon dog. A bushy tail waved lazily

behind his back.

I could easily guess that he was a beastman due to the clothes he was wearing. What confused me was his beastlike form—that should mean he was a child. However, his voice had sounded extremely mature for a child, not to mention his demeanor and attitude. The way he sat, his gestures... Everything reminded me of an older man worn down by age. In terms of looks, he was just as unbearably adorable as Kon and the other kids, but I couldn't bring myself to see him in that light. For some reason, my instincts and something within my heart were telling me that no, the word "cute" wasn't exactly suitable for him.

As I scrutinized our surprise visitor, Techī addressed him. "Ah, hello there, Mister. It's been a while since we've last met."

Kon's voice quickly followed. "Uncle! It's been so long!"

Judging by Techī and Kon's title of address, the raccoon dog should be an adult man at least. But he had a child's appearance. I was utterly perplexed, unable to make heads or tails of the situation.

Techī must have noticed, because she said, "Oh, right. Sorry about that. I forgot to tell you, Mikura. It's an extremely rare case, but some beastfolk will retain their fur, constitution, and appearance even after maturity. Such beastfolk are so few and far between that it completely slipped my mind. As for how rare it is, it's probably around one in every hundred thousand or something like that.

"Such beastfolk are said to have especially potent beast blood and are respected or worshiped for their status. Mr. Oinu here is a priest of a nearby shrine and my brother's friend."

Oinu, huh? That's an interesting name for a raccoon dog beastman. It literally sounds like "noble dog." Despite my surprise, the corners of my lips quirked up in amusement. But once again, I was taken aback when Techī said he was Rei's friend. *Wait, does that mean...?*

"Sure am." He pointed at himself. "The name's Tsurukeshi Oinu, and I'm here 'cause I heard about ya from Arurei. Feel free ta call me Oinu or Tsuru or whatever ya prefer."

“Inu” for dog, and “tsuru” for crane... His parents gave him a rather confusing name for a raccoon dog. Pushing such thoughts aside, I greeted my to-be preserve comrade with a “Nice to meet you” and a self-introduction.

We couldn’t exactly leave him sitting out on the veranda, so we ushered him into the living room. I made an onigiri with leftover ingredients and offered it to him. Oinu accepted the offering with his petite paws and clutched it like an eagle as he wolfed it down.

With a brilliant smile on his face, he said, “Holy smoke, I gotta say, this rice ball is *good*.”

He looked downright adorable with his big eyes and round body, and I almost had the urge to pet him. However, his gestures and speech reeked of a middle-aged fellow, canceling out his charms. No, not just canceled out, it was even overtaking my impression of him. He might look like an adorable little critter, but he felt more like a dwarfish dude wearing an animal costume.

“Ya know, my wife makes good rice balls too,” Oinu continued, “but yours ain’t half bad either. Ya really know how ta make a refined Japanese meal—there’s even miso soup and pickled daikon radish.”

I was indulging in tea when I heard that. Surprised, I stammered, “Y-You’re married, I see.”

“Yep. She’s a stunner I honestly don’t deserve. She’s also a master in the kitchen, and if she ever starts her own restaurant, I bet people would be queuing for days.” He paused. “She’s gonna come here any time now, so I’ll introduce her to ya when she arrives.”

That was news to me. *His wife is coming too?! Huh, I wonder what she’s like.*

Just as these questions surfaced in my mind, I heard a melodious, feminine voice from the front door. “Hello there, is anyone home?”

“Yes!” I called out and stood up. “I’ll be there in a second.”

It should be Mr. Oinu’s wife. I imagined a petite critter waiting at the entrance, and I headed there right away. But when I opened the door, all my expectations were turned upside down.

There stood a beautiful, humanlike woman with her silky raven hair tied up behind her head. She wore a coverall apron, and in her hands was a large paper bag. She seemed to be in her twenties, and her almond eyes were almost foxlike—long and thin. Short black eyebrows sat above them, and on the top of her head were round raccoon dog ears. A tail drooped down her back, swaying lightly back and forth.

The raccoon dog beastwoman bowed politely. “I am from the Oinu family,” she said in a sonorous voice. “Is this the Moriya residence?”

My mind was reeling from shock, but I feigned a calm exterior as I replied, “Yes, it is. Your husband was a step ahead of you, madam, and he is in the living room right now. Please come in.”

I led her to the living room. Upon seeing us, Kon hurriedly fetched a second floor cushion and placed it next to her husband’s. Mrs. Oinu thanked him as she sat down, then took out several filled plastic shopping bags from her paper bag and laid them out on the low table in front of her husband.

Meanwhile, I was still astonished by the fact that Mrs. Oinu was a normal beastwoman. Techī, who was sitting next to me, poked my leg underneath the cover of the table and whispered, “I *told* you that beastfolk like Mr. Oinu are rare. It’s almost impossible for a couple to have the same condition. By the way, it’s a love marriage, and they’re famous around here for how lovey-dovey they are.”

I gave her a signal with my eyes to show that I’d understood.

It was around this time that Mr. Oinu finished his onigiri. “She’s my better half, Kéko Oinu. Hope ya two hit it off. Okay, you see the bags here?” He gestured to the table. “They’re stuffed with the preserves I made. Ya could view ‘em as a ‘nice to meetcha’ gift or a token of my thanks for the rice balls. Take ‘em.”

Silently, Mrs. Oinu gently pushed the bags across the table to my end. I voiced my gratitude as I accepted them, and after asking Mr. Oinu for permission, I peered into their contents.

There were a total of three bags. One was dried masu salmon, one was dried shiitake mushrooms, and the last one was filled with some kind of dried,

unfamiliar fungus.

“Makin’ dried preserves is my heart’s callin’, and the three ya have there are my best work!” Mr. Oinu explained proudly. “As ya can see, they’re dried masu salmon, shiitake, and hon-shimeji. I’m sure I don’t have ta go on how ya should eat these, right?”

“H-Hon-shimeji?!” I blurted out in shock.

Hon-shimeji is one of the highest-grade fungi out there. It’s famous for being scarce, expensive, and delicious. The brown beech mushrooms, buna-shimeji, we often see in supermarkets can’t even compare. The saying goes that “matsutake mushrooms are the king of aroma and hon-shimeji are the king of taste,” and these fungi definitely live up to their reputation. Hon-shimeji goes well in any recipe: clear soup, mushroom rice, a simple stir-fry, pasta, or even stew. Its strong umami flavor packs a punch, and its fleshy texture is satisfying to chew on.

The only unfortunate part of the mushroom is its high price tag. It wasn’t until recently that farmers finally established a stable way of cultivating these mushrooms. Thanks to that, we can find cultivated hon-shimeji in supermarkets now, but it still doesn’t come cheap. Naturally, the wild ones are on a whole other level in terms of price.

I stared at the bag in a daze. The drying process often causes the final product to lose its original rich flavors, and I couldn’t believe that Mr. Oinu would dry such delicacies.

Mr. Oinu wasn’t fazed at all. “C’mon, why’re ya squawkin’ like that? Hon-shimeji tastes good, yeah, but it’s not anythin’ that fancy. If ya really like ’em, I’ll head into the mountain near my place during autumn. It’s overflowing with the stuff, and I’ll pluck some fresh ones for ya.”

He grinned and cackled with good-natured laughter. Then, he proceeded to tell me all about his preserve story.

It had all started when Mr. Oinu watched a program about cultivating shiitake on TV. He’d tested it out on a whim, but he’d ended up harvesting a giant pile of mushrooms. No matter how much he ate or handed out to friends and family, the pile’s size wouldn’t diminish. Thus, he’d tried drying them and had been

pleasantly surprised by the results. Ever since then, he'd picked up a new hobby—making all kinds of dried preserves at every opportunity.

Among all his preserves, the three types he'd brought today were the cream of the crop. According to him, surprisingly, the most popular preserve around here is dried shiitake, which can be used in a variety of recipes.

As he talked, he gestured animatedly with both arms and tilted his chin up with pride. He seemed over the moon that he found someone who could speak his language on this matter. He was so proud, so *passionate*, as he rambled on and on.

Next to him, there was a dust of pink on his wife's cheeks as she stared at him dreamily. She must love this side of her husband. During the conversation, Mr. Oinu would address her from time to time, saying things like, "That was tasty, right?" or "The quality of that batch is unbeatable, don'tcha think?" or "I remember that ya said ya liked it too."

In response, Mrs. Oinu would beam at him with warm eyes and merrily say, "Yes!"



After talking to his heart's content, Mr. Oinu seemed to remember something. "Ah, right." He looked at me and continued, "I heard from Arurei, but yer gonna make sausages and canned food next or somethin', right? Ya should make full use of this dried hon-shimeji in yer sausages. They'll add a nice texture if you chop 'em up and add 'em to the mix. These things go so well with meat. I highly recommend it." He barked out a merry laugh.

As for me, I recalled the taste of the hon-shimeji I ate in the past and started pondering. *What kind of meat and recipe would go well with it?* I had a lot of thinking to do.



A while later, the Oinu couple finished our meet-and-greet session and took their leave. We made promises of experimenting with the canning set and sausage set together once they arrived, and Mr. Oinu insisted that I call him whenever I decide to tackle anything new. After seeing them off, I returned to the living room.

At the entrance of the living room, I stood stock still and stared down at the dried hon-shimeji sitting on the low table. And I kept standing there like a statue.

Techi, who had promptly returned to her seat and was enjoying tea, raised an eyebrow. "They're just mushrooms. There's no need for such a reaction. I do think they are tasty, but these mushrooms are abundant. If you ever want to eat any, you can just walk around the forest."

I blinked dumbly and said in a stupor, "The thing is, uh, that's not the case on the other side of the border. It depends on the type you're getting, but with hon-shimeji, a mere three or four of these could cost you 2,000 yen, and that's on the low end. They're supposed to be extremely rare and extravagant ingredients...or at least, that was what I thought."

Techi shrugged. "Maybe that's the case over there, but they're as common as grass around here."

"Yeah, I eat them all the time too!" Kon chirped.

I glanced at another gift Mr. Oinu had given, the dried masu salmon, before

returning to my seat. I turned to Techii and said, “I keep hearing similar things about the food around here. The masu salmon are big, the boars are huge and plentiful, and the chestnuts of the orchard are treated as luxury goods as well... The power of the Wilds is simply *unbelievable*.”

Techii and Kon looked at each other and exchanged quizzical glances. Speaking up for both of them, Techii said, “I have no clue. You say they’re rather big or rare, but it’s the norm for us. Even in the case of chestnuts, you could say that it’s the kids’ hard work bearing fruit. At any rate, like what I explained before, I can’t tell you everything, because some of it is classified information.” She paused before muttering, “I suppose there is a chance that our trees are the reason for our bountiful land.”

“I-I see. That would make sense. I’ve never seen such enormous trees beyond the border.” I paused, thinking. “Say, if anyone ever takes seeds or saplings to the other side of the border, would it cleanse the air there as well?”

Of course, I wasn’t thinking of actually doing such a thing. It was just my curiosity speaking.

Techii gave me a conflicted look. “Just putting it out there, but those trees aren’t an endemic species of the Wilds or anything. I hear that they used to grow everywhere—across the whole of Japan, in fact. You don’t see them now because they all withered away, and by sheer coincidence, the ones in the Wilds survived to this day. That’s all.

“Even if you transport seeds or saplings to the other side, my guess is that they’ll just wither. But then again, the forest is overflowing with these seeds every autumn, so it’s probably not a big deal if you take some outside. Wait... Now that you mention it, I think I heard someone say that we hand over a set number of seeds to the Japanese government every year. Oh, hang on, was this meant to be classified information?”

“I see...” I said in a low voice before falling into pensive silence.

The fact that they were handing seeds to the government meant that the Japanese government knew of the trees’ ability to cleanse the air. However, I’d never heard of or even seen such trees on the other side. Not even urban legends or rumors. Based on what I had seen so far, the trees must be special in

some way, enough for a normal person like me to sense that the air was different around here.

I had many questions about the Wilds after settling here. Why was the Wilds an autonomous region? Why wasn't it a part of Japanese territory? Why were there so many facilities that would cost a fortune to build and maintain, such as the dam? Why did they construct such an imposing gate and border to protect this land from intruders?

And now, I was starting to have a good guess about the answer—about the confidential information Techī refused to disclose. If the trees truly had the ability to purify air and encourage growth of crops and wild animals around them, they would be an invaluable asset for protecting the environment and revolutionizing our farming industry. Say, for example, if mass cultivation of expensive ingredients such as hon-shimeji or matsutake was possible, it would have a great impact on our economy. Not just the economy—these trees might not only change Japan as we know it, but the entire world.

These trees held that much value—that much *potential*, and that was why the Japanese government guarded this territory with utmost care. They provided aid for infrastructure, and from what I could see on the supermarket shelves, they also imported commodities from the other side of the border. In exchange, the beastfolk would trade tree seeds, which were likely the subject of research in some unknown lab.

However, even after years of investment, their research hadn't borne fruit so far, and the trees were unique to the Wilds to this day. As long as those trees stood tall and strong in the forest, the Beastly Wilds might continue to retain its status as a sanctuary of sorts. The Godwood that Techī and I had stepped into, as well as the incredible poisonous mushrooms in there, could both be the trees' work.

It was at this point that a sudden question jumped into the front of my mind. I voiced it absentmindedly, "By the way, do those trees have any particular names? Like a species name or a local name passed down from your ancestors."

"Oh, that." Techī didn't sound bothered by my probe at all. She answered readily, "The elders call them the *Fusang* or *Himorogi*. I don't know which is the

official one, but..." She shrugged. "Pick the one you prefer, I guess."

Fusang. Himorogi. I frowned. I had a vague understanding of those terms; they were likely something from mythology. That didn't mean I was an expert, so I fished out my phone and searched them up on the Internet.

Fusang: An enormous tree of myth. Legend says that the sun rises in the Fusang tree. Since the sun is reborn anew every morning, the tree is said to be the Tree of Life.

Himorogi: A temporary vessel for the gods during rituals and festivals. The "hi" refers to the "divine spirits," "moro" refers to "descent from heaven," and "gi" refers to "tree."

Okay, I think I get it...? Uh, no, not really. I frowned as I tried to piece the puzzle together. *Did the beastfolk hear of the legend of the Fusang tree and name the trees after that due to their size and purifying abilities? Or...are those trees the real deal?*

I dug a little further, and under the entry about the Fusang, I even saw the words "eternal youth and immortality." It read: *"In the presence of the Fusang tree, it's said that one can regain their youth every morning, just like the rising of the sun."*

As I skimmed those words, I chewed on my lip. *This isn't something I should think about or dig deeper into,* I decided. I closed the webpage, deleted my browsing history, and feigned complete ignorance as I sat down on a floor cushion. Carefully wiping all unnecessary thoughts from my mind, I sipped on my tea and focused wholeheartedly on its aroma and taste.

Trees of Legend

THE theory that the towering trees in the Wilds might be the legendary Fusang trees was mind-blowing. But at the same time, a lot of things suddenly clicked into place. The pure air that apparently prolonged lifespans, the oddly large and numerous wild animals, the abundance of rare mushrooms... The fact that Gramps had led a long, long life, the fact that the Japanese government placed so much importance on the Beastly Wilds...

All the pieces of the puzzle were coming into place, painting a clear picture of an answer that was growing increasingly credible. The Fusang tree was said to be brimming with vitality, enough to bring forth a youthful sun every morning—enough to grant immortality and wash away the marks of time. If such a tree truly existed, it would shake our world's very foundation.

I couldn't afford to lose my composure in front of Tech and Kon. I pretended I was still oblivious—or rather, I was making every effort to scrub the conclusion from my memory. However, it didn't work. Even after I had taken a bath, even after I climbed into my futon, the legendary tree remained stuck in the back of my mind like coffee stains.

But of course, no matter what turmoil went on in my mind, the world churned on as usual. The next day, I traveled on foot to the supermarket with Kon, claiming that I had some shopping to do.

In truth, my aim was the giant trees that formed the dome in the heart of the forest. I'd brought Kon along because I felt I wouldn't lose my composure around him. I was hoping that he would act as a deterrent, making me think twice before I did anything I'd regret.

My companion wasn't nearly as tense as I was. "The sun's up, the shadows are short, and I have a hunch about what's for lunch!" he sang as he skipped across the path.

I felt my anxiety subside somewhat. His easygoing energy was exactly what I

needed right now. *Even if those trees are truly the legendary Fusang trees, it's not like I can make a difference by going near them. But...I can't quell my urge. I want to see them for myself. I want the stir in my heart to die down. I want an answer.*

Such thoughts propelled me forward. I marched on, and after some walking, I arrived at the dome. Like skyscrapers, the trees climbed to the heavens as they surrounded the area where the supermarket was—no, where the entire settlement was. I stared up at the verdant canopy and observed it quietly.

But soon, a raspy voice interrupted my thoughts. “Curious about the Fusang trees, are you?”

I stilled, halting my steps as I searched for the source.

The voice came from the car parking lot of one of the houses that lined the side of the footpath. An elderly man clad in a black jacket and a monochromatic tracksuit was sitting on a stool there, idling. Perhaps he was enjoying the rays of sunlight that snuck through the leafy canopy above, or perhaps he was passing the time by people-watching. His face was skinny and slightly sunken, and pointed ears—likely a fox's or a dog's—sat above his gray hair.

Kon was a step ahead of me as he chirped, “Grampa Karashina! Hi!”

The elderly man smiled at Kon. “Hey there.” That was all he said before he turned his sharp gaze on me. The message was clear: *Answer, or else.*

No matter what, I should be respectful. I started the conversation with a greeting. “It's nice to meet you, mister.” I walked in his direction and stopped in front of him. “Yes, I'm curious,” I admitted.

“Oh, so you're interested in them, hm? And? What are you going to do?”

I stared right into his eyes as I replied, “I'm not going to do anything now, nor do I have plans of doing anything in the future. It's just my pure curiosity speaking. I was just wondering whether they are truly Fusang trees.”

“And what if they are? What *then*?”

“I...don't know,” I replied. “I guess I might get the shock of my life? I mean, a legend in the flesh is right before my eyes. Surprise isn't enough to describe

how I would feel. Anyone would be, well, happy and exhilarated, I think.”

“Wouldn’t you be tempted to get your hands on the trees’ powers?”

I shook my head slowly. “Not at the moment, no. But perhaps after I marry Miss Techii and have children, I might have such thoughts if our children run out of time.”

He barked out a clipped laugh. “Well, well, you sure are honest.” He paused. “Even if that day does come, it’s not worth it. Those things are beyond the understanding and control of mere mortals. Be like Tomiyasu, think of them as auspicious symbols and nothing more. If you’re *that* curious, I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to give you one of their seeds.”

The elderly man thrust his hand into his pocket and fished out what seemed like an in-shell walnut. He tossed the rather round and large seed at me.



I was taken by surprise, but I managed to catch it safely. I wedged it between my thumb and index finger before lifting it in front of my eyes to take a good look. As I scrutinized it, I asked, “Is it really fine to give such a seed to someone like me?”

He smirked meaningfully. “Yeah, do whatever you want with it. You can even try planting it in your orchard. A person with brains wouldn’t try such a foolish thing, though.”

Hearing that, I stared hard at the seed. Then, I shifted my gaze to one of the Fusang trees in the far distance. My mind struggled to get an accurate gauge of its colossal size. It was too distant, too big, or perhaps a combination of both. If this man was telling me the truth, it would grow into a tree of such magnitude if I planted it in my orchard. And growth requires nourishment—it would suck up all the nutrients from the soil.

A tree of such size would literally crush all the smaller trees in my orchard with its roots, and the original trees might wither due to a lack of nutrients. As if that wasn’t enough, the elderly man was implying that an even bigger disaster would be in store.

This gamble wasn’t worth it. I didn’t know whether this seed was the real deal, and even if it was, who knew whether the trees had the same powers as the legend? Gramps never relied on this mysterious power, either. Perhaps I should follow suit and treat it as a lucky charm.

Mind made up, I said, “I’ll place it on the altar at home. If it’s a lucky symbol, I’m sure that Gramps would be delighted. Thank you for your generosity.”

Surprise overtook his features, and his eyes widened. Then, it transformed into a sigh that was both sullen and disappointed. But finally, the corners of his lips pulled up into a more genuine smile and he gave me a nod.

I shoved the seed into my pocket. Sensing that this was the end of the conversation, I said, “Please excuse me, I shall get going then.” I walked back onto the footpath.

I heard Kon’s energetic voice behind me. “See you around, Grampa!” He soon joined me on the footpath, happily running in circles around my feet as we

headed to the supermarket. With a big smile, he exclaimed, “Congrats, Mikura!”

I tilted my head quizzically. “Hm? What are you celebrating about?”

Kon grinned even wider as he said excitedly, “Grampa Karashina is the *press-e-dent* of the community association! If you’re his friend, you’re a part of the community association! This means you can take part in the upcoming summer festival too, Mikura!”

“Oh... So he’s the president of the community association, that makes sense. By the way, what do you do in that festival?”

“Umm... Everyone dances together, eats nice food, prays at the altar, and... Right, we also have lots of fireworks!”

“F-Fireworks?!” I gasped. “In a *forest*? Wouldn’t that start a forest fire? Oh, but maybe the trees don’t burn that easily because they’re still alive...?” My voice grew smaller and smaller with uncertainty.

“Hmm? It’s probably fine! We’ve never had any big fires during the festival.” As he finished his sentence, Kon broke into a sprint and darted right into the supermarket.

I hadn’t realized that we’d already arrived. Hurriedly, I chased after him, but not before I took one last look up at the Fusang trees. I breathed out, closed my eyes briefly, and threw all those thoughts out the window. I’d been so busy thinking about the trees that I’d completely forgotten about planning our lunch menu, which Kon had been looking forward to. Racking my brain for ideas, I entered the wooden supermarket.

Everything after that was as usual. I went around selecting ingredients and shopped as necessary. When we approached the meat section, Kon grabbed his usual stepladder and hurried to one corner.

He raised his voice. “I spy with my little eye some sausages! I can’t wait to make sausages by myself!”

He was peering into a fridge crammed full of sausage packs. The sausages came in all kinds of sizes, and the selection of brands was just as varied.

The day he couldn't wait for likely wasn't the following Monday, when the sausage set would arrive. He was referring to when he became an adult and shed all his fur like Techī. Due to the fur that shrouded him from head to toe, Kon could only watch whenever we cooked. He wanted to grow up swiftly and make food, like sausages, without such burdens.

I cast my eyes down and pressed my lips into a thin line. After a moment of consideration, I said, "Hey, Kon. If you're that eager, do you want to start learning and practicing cooking?"

Kon whipped his head around so quickly that he almost left an afterimage. His eyes were as round as saucers as his gaze bore into me. Then, he tilted his head in question. "Learn and practice?"

"Yeah." I nodded. "There are a lot of things we have to watch out for when we cook. Before, I said that hygiene, proper cooking, and expiry dates are very important for sausages. That's the case for all food. As cooks, we need to think about all this on behalf of the people who are eating our food. If you truly want to cook and make sausages in the future, it's better to start learning as soon as possible.

"I've told you all kinds of things about cooking so far, but practice is the key to success," I explained. "I know that your fur is inconvenient for cooking like we mentioned a while ago, so we'll need to put some measures in place. Let's see... Cooks at a dining hall often wear coverall aprons when they serve meals, so let's get that. Masks, gloves, hats... Okay, we should get a whole set. After we have all that ready, shall we start off with something simple?"

His eyes grew even wider, and his jaw dropped. A mixture of anticipation and elation brightened his face like the very sun itself. As if he couldn't suppress his rush of emotions, he sprung down from the stepladder and threw his arms around my leg. He opened and closed his mouth, as if he wanted to say something to voice his joy but couldn't find the right words. Instead, he showed it through his actions by hugging my leg tight, as if what I said meant the world to him.

Nervously, he raised his head and met my eyes. This time, the emotions that swirled in his expression were delight and bewilderment. "A-Are you sure? I

mean, my fur would get everywhere...”

Crouching down to meet his gaze, I gave him the biggest and most reassuring smile I could muster. “Yeah, of course. We’ll take every precaution possible so that you won’t get too much fur inside the food. Even if you do, it will be part of practice, and it’s okay to make mistakes. Remember, Tech and I *do* have body hair as well, just a lot less. No matter how careful we are, sometimes it’ll end up somewhere we don’t like. I suppose that’ll be a good learning experience too.”

I paused. “Well, before we can dive into any of that, we need to prepare coverings like a coverall apron. I don’t think they have aprons your size in shops, so I guess I’ll have to grab a sewing machine to stitch one together. We’ll need to add elastic cords to the sleeve openings so that they’re tight against your body. Hmm, what else...? Let’s see, how many days would it take to make the whole set?” I wondered out loud.

A soft, warm, and gentle voice flowed out from behind my back. “I shall make the coverall apron and necessary equipment, then.”

It was clearly directed at me. Startled, I turned around and saw a woman wearing a shirt, slacks, and an apron above both. Her eyes were large and charming. Chipmunk ears that reminded me of Kon’s sat above her innocent, round face. Brown waist-length hair splashed down her back freely like melted chocolate, rippling slightly with the wind from the supermarket air conditioning.

The moment he spotted her, Kon dashed over. “Mommy!” He reached for the hem of her pants and pulled himself up, running up her frame as if she were a tree. The woman was completely unruffled as he snuggled into the crook of her arm.

“I saw my baby and couldn’t help but stop and eavesdrop.” The woman gave me a warm smile as she subconsciously rocked the curled-up Kon in her arms, a learned habit after doing it for years. “It’s an honor to meet you, I’m Yotama Sanmaya. I cannot overstate my gratitude for all the affection and care you have showered on my sunshine.”

I stood up and straightened my spine. “It’s nice to meet you, I’m Mikura Moriya. I should be the one thanking you—Kon has helped me so much ever since I moved here. And...I’m so sorry for all the trouble I caused you a while

ago, and—”

She interrupted me softly but firmly. “Yamasa—I mean, my husband said you gave him a formal apology, so there’s no need for any of that. In fact, perhaps it was a good thing, since Kon’s savings ballooned overnight.” She lowered her voice. “Don’t tell anyone else I said this, but I actually think that Kon staying at your place during the incident was lucky for us all. You’ve gone above and beyond for him, and are even teaching him how to be a baby chef. I owe you a great debt.”

She lifted the hand of the arm that was holding Kon and placed it against her lips in a ladylike manner. But it barely hid anything when she opened her mouth wide and laughed heartily. Due to her movement, Kon lost his comfortable resting place. He stopped clinging to his mother’s apron and nimbly raced down her frame, landing lightly on the floor.

He looked up at his mother and asked in a hushed, hopeful voice, “Are you really going to make them for me?”

“Why, of course.” She gently patted his head. “You should know all about Mommy’s amazing needlework. We’re not making anything fancy or complicated. I think...one or two days should be enough for a coverall apron and a hat. Hmm, any random cloth would do. I’ll repurpose elastic bands I usually use for trousers, and a mask wouldn’t be too hard to make, either. Oh, but gloves might be a challenge.”

Kon turned his pleading gaze to me. I saw his quiet call for help, and after a moment of pondering, I said, “That’s fine. You don’t have to make gloves. He can either use plastic gloves from the supermarket or wrap his paws in plastic bags and seal them off with rubber bands. The only thing I’m stuck on is, well, what we should do about his big bushy tail, and—”

“Ah, that isn’t a big deal,” Kon’s mother cut in once again. “He can just shove his tail into his shirt or trousers. As for trousers, hmm... He can wear ones with elastic waists and hems, then cover his feet with socks. That should do, right? The problem is his face.” She sighed. “A mask isn’t enough to cover the whole thing, so I guess we can smear the exposed fur with tea seed oil or something to keep it in place. Even if his hair does end up in the food, he can just take it

home. I'll take responsibility and eat all of it."

She smiled down at her child. "Have fun out there, my sunshine."

Kon turned his back to me as he looked up at his mother, but I was willing to bet that he was doing his usual close-eyed smile at her. A little while later, he turned around to face me and exclaimed, "I can't wait, Mikura!"



MONDAY arrived. The delivery man paid a visit as always, and he brought with him the canning set and sausage-making set.

I immediately stored them in the warehouse. I'd promised Kon that we would practice cooking together, so I wanted to wait until we had the opportunity. I wanted to have Kon by my side when I tried making proper canned food and sausages for the first time in my life—I wanted to share this moment with my little friend. Thus, I would hide them from the light of day until the time was ripe.

That shouldn't take too long, actually. After two or three practice sessions with Kon, it should be enough for us to pinpoint all the problems with our planned setup and fix the major issues. Even if I took preparation time into account, we should be able to start tackling these new tools before the end of this week.

The day passed by peacefully, with nothing out of the ordinary other than the long-anticipated delivery.



TUESDAY morning started off quiet. I woke up in the early morning, did my daily rituals, and was considering enjoying breakfast with TV as entertainment.

That is, until the hurried thumping of feet echoed out, sounding disjointed in the silence.

"Is that Kon?" I wondered out loud.

"Definitely," Techii declared.

A moment later, Kon charged into the veranda like a small rocket. Like a sea lion jumping onto shore, he dove onto the deck with a loud thud, face flat

against the ground. He was flailing his feet, shaking off his shoes, which went flying off into the distance. He lifted his face and gave us a radiant smile before lifting the large bag in his hand with pride. The bag was puffy, likely filled with the coverall apron we had mentioned.

“MIKURA!” That was the first word out of his lips. “THE APRON’S READY!”

Techi and I smiled wryly as we replied together, “Morning.”

“Ah, yes, good morning!” he said frantically before letting out a yelp of realization. “Wait, I forgot to eat breakfast!”

He must’ve gotten too excited about the apron and the thought that he was going to cook properly for the very first time. Techi and I exchanged fond smiles before we stood up simultaneously. I went off to the kitchen to prepare Kon’s portion of breakfast while Techi guided Kon to the bathroom. She helped him change out of his muddy clothes, which must have gotten dirty after he sprinted with all his might. She fetched a change of clothes, which his parents had left in our custody in case something like this happened, and helped him wear it. After washing their hands, they returned to the living room.

Now that everyone was here and breakfast was near, we voiced our thanks for the food in unison before reaching out with our chopsticks. As we savored the meal, we chatted about whatever came to mind.

Techi propped up her chin with her palm. “Kon’s going to cook, hm? I hope it goes well.”

I gave her a confident nod. “I’m sure it will. People who love eating are usually good cooks. In my opinion, the ability to enjoy food and work up the motivation to go find delicious things is a kind of talent. Kon mentioned he used to stand by and watch when my great-grandfather used to cook, which means that he has passively absorbed a lot of knowledge about the cooking process. That means he should find success in the kitchen.”

I added, “You mentioned that beastfolk have a better sense of smell than humans, yeah? That means he can discern good ingredients from bad with his nose alone, which will make a more delicious meal. You know, maybe he’ll be a more talented chef than me one day.”

“I’ll work really hard!” Kon declared. “I’ll work really, *really*, hard so that I can make nice food for Mommy, Daddy, Mikura, and Techii!” He squeezed his eyes shut and smiled wide.

The smile was infectious, spreading to me and Techii as we continued to work our way through our breakfast.

After we all finished our meals, Techii got dressed and left for work. Kon and I brushed our teeth then I went to attend to the chores. I needed to get the necessary tasks out of the way, like cleaning and laundry, before we could have any fun. Furthermore, we had only just eaten breakfast. Even if we whipped something up now, we didn’t have space in our stomachs. It was a good idea to burn those calories by finishing the tasks around the house.

While I did the housework, Kon accompanied me the whole time, fidgety and antsy. *Sorry, but you need to bear with me. I have to do housework until eleven at least.*

But even as time ticked by, Kon’s restlessness didn’t die down, and he stared at me with these shining, adorable eyes. I felt my resolve crumble before his might. As I wiped the corridor with a Swiffer mop armed with a clean pad, I called out to him. “Hey, what do you want to make for lunch? Do you have anything in mind?”

“Huh?!” he yelped. “Um, uh, I, uhhh... Uhhhhhh...”

He fell into deep thought, a small frown knitting his eyebrows together. Perhaps I had surprised him with my sudden question, startling all thoughts out of his mind. Or perhaps he had been so fixated on his desire to challenge cooking that he had completely forgotten to think about the details.

Finally, he made up his mind. “Erm, I wanna make an omelet!”

“Omelet, huh?” I hummed in thought. “By that, you don’t mean omurice, do you? You mean an omelet without chicken fried rice, right?”

“Yeah!” He nodded furiously. “I saw them on TV yesterday, and they looked *so good!*”

“In that case... Okay, it doesn’t call for much preparation, and we have all the ingredients already. But I do have to warn you that I can’t promise our omelets

would be as good as the ones you saw on TV. Are you sure you still want to make them?”

“I do! Mommy told me that I can only make proper food after I become a grown-up! I remember!”

Luckily, his mother had mentally prepared him for his first cooking session. *Good, I'll just worry about the actual cooking, then.* In my mind, I slowly put together a recipe.

The recipe for plain omelets is simple. The drawback is that they won't stand out to anyone as remarkably delightful. You season them with pepper and salt, drizzle on some ketchup, and you're good to go. There you have it, a nicely done but not-too-extraordinary omelet.

If we were to make something flavorful, something that Kon would be elated over, we had to add a few steps. The bare minimum was adding in minced meat and onions. As for taste, we should add some milk, salt, pepper, and butter, which would make a rich flavor when combined. That, together with the chewy minced meat and crunchy onions, would become a satisfying meal that went well with ketchup.

For such recipes, it was better to stir-fry the meat and onions separately from the eggs to bring out their flavors, but our master chef was Kon today, so cooking them in the microwave was probably wiser.

I nodded to myself. “All right, we have a plan. Omelets are on the menu today, then. Let's make them fancy and scrumptious by adding some meat and onions! We have minced meat at home, and that doesn't need much preparation. But what are you going to do about the onions? Do you want to try chopping them yourself? Of course, I'll be supporting you every step of the way.”

I could practically see stars in his eyes. “ONIONS! That's the stuff that makes you cry, right? It leaves you sobbing your heart out! Wah, I wanna try right away!”

Chopping onions was actually quite painful, but to a newbie like Kon, who hadn't experienced the harsher side of being a chef, it was novel and exciting. And then, off he went, dashing around the house. He fetched a rag from who-

knows-where and started furiously wiping the floor so that I could finish my chores as soon as possible.

I can't let him do all the hard work. I tightened my hold on my mop and aimed to finish the housework at record speed.



AFTER the chores were done and our hands were washed, I headed to the kitchen to prepare our cookware and ingredients. I'd prepared a cardboard box of an appropriate height beforehand, which I'd filled with canned food and newspapers to increase stability. I fetched that and placed it on the countertop.

While I was busy preparing, Kon wasn't slacking either. He smeared tea seed oil onto the fur on his face, and put on his elastic hat, mask, and overall apron. He stuffed his tail into his trousers before finally completing his getup with socks. His mother, it seemed, had prepared gloves as well. They were mini plastic ones, which were a little baggy on Kon's paws, but they served their purpose. Armed to the teeth, Kon waited obediently for me to finish up.

I walked over and gave him a big nod. "All right, shall we get started?"

It was hard to tell with all the coverings on his face, but his shut eyes must mean he was flashing his signature smile at me. With a rhythmical pitter-patter of footsteps, he raced into the kitchen. Just as he was about to parkour onto the sink like always, I stopped him. I placed my hands below both his armpits and lifted him up steadily onto the counter until he was right in front of the cardboard box.

"Let's cook here today," I said. "I'll grab the tools right now, so sit tight."

I spread out a baking mat on the surface of the cardboard box and placed the chopping board on top of it. With this, Kon had a simple kitchen counter that was perfect for his height. Next, I placed a smallish onion and a paring knife onto the chopping board. Lastly, I made a makeshift "wastebasket" using a flyer and a bowl then placed it next to the mini kitchen counter. *That should be good enough for now.*

"The first step is preparing the onions," I said. "Peel the brown skin and throw it into the wastebasket. Cut off the stem on the top and the roots at the

bottom. Chop them into smaller chunks that are easier to handle and keep chopping them into smaller pieces. Finally, repeatedly bring down your knife onto the chopping board until the pieces are roughly the size of a corn kernel. It's a bit of an unorthodox method of dicing onions, but it's your first time, so let's go with the safest and simplest method."

Kon looked at me with an indescribable expression that flickered between understanding and confusion. *I think taking one step at a time is better.*

I walked behind Kon's back and said, "I'll teach you as we go." I reached out from behind him, picked up the onion, and handed it to him.

Some people prefer to cut off the unwanted bits before they peel the onion, but today, starting with peeling was a better idea. The very first step of his culinary journey should be something simple, easy, and fun.

Kon turned around and stole nervous glances at me as he gingerly moved his hands, patting the onion down. He tried pushing it lightly, poking it, pinching the outer brown skin...then looked at me once again.

"Try pinching the skin at the stem end," I advised. "That's the pointy part, do you see that? It's your first time, so it might not go smoothly, and that's totally fine. Making mistakes during this step isn't a big deal either. Once you get a grip on it, you can pull down with all your might, like tearing open a snack wrapper."

Kon obeyed my instructions dutifully and tugged hard on the brown skin. With a small crackling sound, the dried skin tore off.

I continued, "Throw that piece into the wastebasket over there. Then, do that over and over until the brown parts are gone. Can you do that for me?"

And that was exactly what Kon did. Though he ended up scattering small shreds of skin on his mini counter, the resulting onion was nice and pristine.

Smiling, I said, "Time to cut the stem now. Try holding the paring knife. I'll hold your paws and move the knife as a demonstration, so pay attention to the movement and the cutting sensation."

With apprehension, Kon reached for the paring knife. Though I had chosen the smallest of them all, it was still quite large for a little one like Kon. Once he had a steady grip on it, I wrapped my hand around his, careful not to squash his

tiny paws. Slowly and cautiously, I lifted the knife and cut off the stem and roots. I proceeded to cut the onion into halves, then into smaller pieces.

In the middle of the cutting process, Kon lifted his chin and turned his body right around so that he could look up at my face. His eyes were glimmering with joy—or, to be more accurate, joy *and* tears from the chopped onions.

I paused my movement. “Hey, that’s dangerous. Don’t look away from the knife when you’re using it, okay? After I cut it a little finer, you’re going to be doing all the work by yourself, so let’s focus right now.”

Hurriedly, Kon turned his gaze back onto the knife. In utter silence, he fixed his gaze on the knife’s movements.

Since I couldn’t use too much force and had to cut slowly, the resulting pieces were rather crude. Once they were small enough, I used the knife to gather all the scattered pieces into a rectangular pile before letting go. “All right. Now, can you use both hands to hold the knife?”

He did as instructed, and seeing that, I spoke slowly so that he wouldn’t feel pressured. “Good job. Okay, try swinging the knife down. Yes, just like that, you’re doing awesome. All right, one more time. Perfect. Yes, one more time... You’re doing wonderfully, Kon. Let’s try swinging the knife repeatedly across the entire chopping board. Chop chop chop from right to left, chop chop chop from top to bottom. You can do this however many times you want until all the big pieces are gone.”

Having received permission to act freely, Kon sounded like he was over the moon as he chirped, “Gotcha!” Though he sounded ecstatic, he didn’t lose his cool at all when he moved his knife. He painstakingly moved it up and down, just like my demonstration. He chopped over and over and over...but never once were his paws unsteady, likely due to his routine staff swinging during his orchard job. The knife went exactly where he wanted it to go, and the more he chopped, the more control he gained. Rhythmical thudding echoed out in the kitchen, almost like the beat of a drum.

I’d braced myself for the chopping step to drag on for a long time, but Kon was going above all my expectations. His pace was steady, and he was cutting to the bottom of the pieces properly. *Looks like I underestimated him.*

Once the chopping was complete, I instructed him to hold the chopping board near the bowl and push the onions inside with the knife. I added minced meat to the bowl and asked Kon to shake some salt and pepper into the mixture.

His gloves would get dirty when he kneaded the mixture, and changing gloves during every step was a bit of a pain, so I covered his gloves with plastic bags. I asked him to knead the contents of the bowl until it was evenly mixed, as if he were massaging it. When it was ready, I covered the bowl with plastic wrap and moved it into the microwave.

Microwaves nowadays come with automatic cooking features, but I didn't use them. I carried Kon in front of the microwave and guided him through the process of selecting the power level and the time. Naturally, he had the honor of pressing the "Start" button.

"There we go. The first part of the recipe is done," I declared. "Next is mixing the eggs and making the actual omelet!"

With a hum, the microwave plate rotated, and Kon stared intently at it. The moment he heard what I said, he spun his upper body around once again to look at me. In the loudest, most excited voice I had ever heard from him, he shouted, "Cooking is SOOO fun!"

I gave him a big nod and a wide grin before settling him down on the countertop. "Time to dive into the main part!" I said, psyching him up.

The next step required the portable stove, so I transferred the chopping board into the sink and moved the portable stove onto the baking mat. A small frying pan went on top of the stove, ready for action at any time. Next, I fetched a small bowl, a carton of eggs, salt, pepper, milk, and salted butter. Lastly, I readied the plate on which we would serve the food.

I called out to Kon, "Shall we get started then?"

Kon was wide-eyed as his gaze darted back and forth between the frying pan and the bowl, uncertain about which one to start with. In the end, his hand reached out toward the carton of eggs.

"Good idea," I said with an approving nod. "Cracking eggs into the bowl sounds like a good place to start. For now, let's work with two eggs. Don't

worry, you can take out the shell even if it ends up in the bowl, so take your time. Oh, do you know how to crack eggs?”

He gave me a firm nod before taking out one egg from the carton. He held it horizontally between his two hands and knocked the center of the shell twice against the rim of the bowl. Seeing the cracks in the shell, he lifted the egg above the bowl and cautiously tugged it left and right at the same time with some force. The shell split, and its gooey contents slid into the bowl.

I peered into the bowl. “Nice job, you didn’t get any shells inside there. Shall we get started on the second one?”

The second egg went just as smoothly as the first one. The rest of the steps were rather easy: shaking in salt and pepper and pouring in milk. As for how much of each one we added, well, let’s just say it was “to taste.” After Kon poured in what seemed like a suitable amount, I handed him the pair of chopsticks he usually used and asked him to beat the mixture.

While Kon busied himself with the task at hand, I turned on the stove and slowly heated the frying pan over medium heat. The microwave had also finished its work, and I took out the bowl with the minced meat and onions.

“When working with fire,” I lectured, “the first rule is to never touch the pan or pot, which can give you a nasty burn. I’m sure you know that. But remember that the fire can also be a hazard, spreading to items around it or onto your clothes. And keep this in mind: even if everything goes well this time, you must never, *ever*, use the stove by yourself. Make sure that an adult is always with you.”

I accepted the bowl with the beaten eggs from Kon and held onto the frying pan grip to steady it. “All right, butter first.”

Anxiety formed a deep crease between Kon’s eyebrows as he pulled out a block of butter wrapped in silver foil. The type I’d bought was precut—*hooray for the country of convenience, Japan!*—and he used a butter knife to pick up one small block. With a small battle cry, “In you go!” he slid it into the pan.

It must be the first time he’d ever used a stove, because he stared unblinkingly at the insignificant sight of butter melting as if it were an emotional scene in a movie. When there was nothing left but a puddle, he turned and

looked at me with a sense of accomplishment on his face, proud that he had overcome a high hurdle.

“Nice job,” I praised as I handed the bowl to him. “Time for the eggs. Tip the bowl and pour everything inside at once.”

Just in case, I placed my hand against the bowl, ready in case it ever was on the verge of spilling. Kon didn’t seem to notice—he was too immersed to notice such a detail. Without another word, he faced the pan with utmost concentration and tilted the bowl heavily.

I moved the empty bowl elsewhere and handed the chopsticks back to Kon. “Now use those chopsticks to slowly stir the entire pan,” I said.

Once the egg started hardening, I asked him to hand over the chopsticks and gave him the minced meat and onion bowl. I guided him through tipping roughly a third of the contents into the center of the setting egg. With that out of the way, I handed him a silicone spatula.

“For the finishing touch,” I explained, “you use the spatula to fold half of the egg over and cover the meat and onions. It might be a struggle at first, but even if you mess up, it doesn’t affect the taste, so go wild.”

Kon had adopted a stern look on his face, almost like a professional chef concentrating on his craft. “Okay,” he replied in a sonorous voice. He lifted the spatula with a firm grip and cautiously moved it across the pan. Though parts of the omelet tore, he somehow managed to pull through and fold it into an omelet that could be classified as “skillfully done.”

Seeing the finished omelet, Kon deflated with relief as all the energy rushed out of him. He slumped down onto the countertop, likely thinking that all the tasks were complete. With a small smile on my face, I quietly turned off the fire, held up the frying pan, and quickly transferred the contents onto the plate. I did it as smoothly as possible so that Kon wouldn’t notice or sense that something was off.

Then, moving to the fridge, I fetched a tube of ketchup and set it down in front of Kon. “Come on, we’re not quite finished yet. The traditional Japanese omelet needs a little bit more color before it’s authentic. How could we skip the ketchup? Let’s not put too much... Oh, you could try drawing something simple

if you like.”

“Really?!” Kon sprung right up. “I have the perfect thing in mind!” He picked up the tube and started drawing on the finished omelet. A red dot extended into an ellipse with a pointed end on the top, and on the bottom of the ellipse, he drew a horizontal line. It was clear as day that he was drawing a chestnut.

“What a delicious chestnut you got over there,” I praised, seeing the finished drawing. “And...all done! Congratulations!”

Kon shut the lid of the ketchup tube, but instead of the elation I expected to see, he looked somewhat puzzled. His gaze was aimed at the minced meat and onions left in the bowl. He tilted his head at me, as if to say, “Why are there leftovers?”

I chuckled in good humor. “I know that your portion is done, Kon, but Tech and I have to eat lunch too!”

His eyes grew wide, as if that had never crossed his mind before. Then, his face scrunched up into a frown, silently expressing that he didn’t have it in him to make two more.

Feeling my smile grow wider, I said, “Don’t worry, I’ll make the rest.”

The cooking process itself wasn’t that tiring, so he probably had plenty of stamina left. But that wasn’t the case in terms of mental fatigue. Challenging a first is always more tiring than one would expect. I helped him into his usual seat so that he could get plenty of rest while I went on to swiftly make the two remaining omelets. I was vigilant every step of the way so that I could be a good role model for him to reference.

As he sat on the chair, Kon watched me intently. In a grave, heartfelt voice, he said, “Cooking looks so easy, but it’s actually so much work...”

“Yeah. You also have to go to shops to buy ingredients and cookware, and after cooking, you need to do the dishes and clean up. Repeating the process every day can be tiring at times, and occasionally, I think it’s tedious.”

“Mmhmm, I feel you. When I get home, I’ll go thank Mommy for all her hard work every day.”

“I’m sure she’ll be overjoyed. But aren’t you forgetting something, Kon? This isn’t the end of our cooking session. Food is made to be eaten. You worked so hard on your omelet with meat and ketchup... It’s fresh off the stove, so it’ll be steamy, fluffy, and very tasty.”

Realization dawned on his expression. He finally remembered that, for the very first time in his life, he was going to taste his own cooking. He started growing fidgety and restless. Leaping out of his chair, he went over to his plate and tried lifting it, but had second thoughts as he deduced that he should wipe the low table first. He turned back to the sink, looking for a kitchen towel, but froze when he realized that he didn’t know where the towels were kept. There was a flurry of motion in the kitchen as he darted in all directions in a panic, flailing his hands in the air.

“It’s okay,” I called out to him. “I’ll prepare the low table and move the food there. Kon, can you head to the living room and take off all your coverings? You’d do me a great favor if you fold them up neatly. Your mom made these, after all, so please treat them with care.”

“I will!” he promised.

It seemed that we finished our cooking session at the perfect time. Moments later, Techii came home at lunchtime, likely after having dumped her job as supervisor on Rei. She walked to the bathroom to wash her hands. Seeing that, Kon must have assumed that lunch was about to begin at any moment, and he sprinted at full speed into the living room as if his life depended on it.

There is honestly no rush, I thought, shaking my head with fond exasperation. I wiped the low table clean before laying out the omelets and spoons. As for our beverages, I selected the milk that was delivered every morning. Remembering that I had made some coleslaw salad prior to Kon’s cooking with cabbage, carrots, and corn, I served them on three small plates. As I prepared the lunch table, Techii came into the living room and sat down at the same time as Kon, who had finished changing out of his cooking gear.

The table was set, so I took a seat as well. Together, we voiced our thanks for the food and reached for our spoons. I dug out some of the steaming hot omelet and brought it to my mouth. The egg was soft, laced with the richness of

butter and just the right amount of salt, and pepper added a nice touch of spice that enhanced the flavor. As I worked my way through the egg, the sweet onions and savory minced meat started peeking through the fluffy yellow. The omelet only got better and better throughout the meal.

When Kon polished off around half of his omelet, he exclaimed, “Mikura, this is so yummy! Omelets are amazing!”

Techi and I shared a smile. I’d guided him through the seasoning process, and the recipe wasn’t all that difficult—the bar for a good outcome wasn’t too high. More than anything, Kon was eating his own cooking. How could it not be delicious? He was completely absorbed as he savored every bite.

Techi leaned forward. “Is your omelet that good, Kon? Hey, can I try some?”

Beaming, Kon offered his plate to her. Techi scooped up a teeny, tiny bit of Kon’s creation and had a taste. She broke into a smile and said, “You’re right. It’s just as wonderful as you said it was.”

I couldn’t even begin to describe the delight on Kon’s face. His breathing grew erratic with joy, and he offered his plate to me as well. Passing up on this offer would be a crime, and I scooped up a little for myself. The moment I carried it into my mouth, I gave him the biggest smile possible and praised, “It’s great.”

Techi pushed her plate forward at Kon. “Try some of Mikura’s version.”

Kon nodded and carried a big spoonful into his mouth. He tilted his head quizzically as he chewed. His expression was practically saying, “It’s tasty too. Maybe mine is around the same standard. That’s strange...”

With a big grin, Techi said, “Impressive, right? The first omelet you made stands toe to toe with the cooking of a skilled chef like Mikura.”

It was a natural outcome since we used the same seasoning and ingredients, but Kon was still overjoyed. He huffed proudly, puffing out his chest as he grinned from ear to ear. He wolfed down his omelet at lightning speed, guzzled down his salad, and drank his milk in large gulps.

I couldn’t help but feel a burst of admiration for Techi and her skills with children. She was clearly used to nurturing kids’ confidence and sense of self. *Maybe it’s a bit overdue. I mean, she is a preschool teacher, and it’s in her job*

description. Still, she's remarkable. Watching Kon, I was certain that he would continue to eagerly tackle the art of cooking.

The next thing I knew, all of Kon's plates were clean, and he let out a long, satisfied sigh while rubbing his belly. Techii and I shared amused glances. We weren't ones to back off from a challenge, and we helped ourselves to our food.

When all our plates were nice and empty, Kon suddenly sat up with a gasp. "I almost forgot, but none of my fur got into the food! It's not a problem anymore!" He looked at me, then looked at Techii with big, sparkling eyes. "Can I make sausages and canned food if I keep this up?"

I leisurely sipped my milk as I replied, "Totally. Not only did you keep your food fur-free, but you also followed all my instructions properly during cooking. You didn't do anything dangerous, you didn't mess around—you only focused with all your heart. If you keep up the good work, I'm certain that you'll find success with sausages too."

"Really?! When can I get started then?! When are we gonna make sausages?!"

I hummed in thought. "We have most of the stuff we need, so...this coming Sunday, I think."

Kon pouted. "But that's so far away. Why Sunday? Why not tomorrow?"

"The thing is, we aren't making preserved sausages," I explained. "For these, I'm thinking about eating them on the day we make them, so Sunday would be best if we want other people to gather as well. The more the merrier, right? Just having sausages sounds a bit boring, so let's prepare a bunch of other things and turn it into a barbecue party. Holding it on Sunday should give us plenty of prep time."

The first to respond to my words wasn't Kon, who puffed out his cheeks with displeasure, but Techii. "A barbecue, hm? I certainly would like to have some beer with that, so Sunday would work for me. Drinking alcohol on the workday isn't the most responsible idea, after all..." She nodded to herself. "Sounds good."

Kon's expression changed dramatically as he heard those words. With a small

fwoosh, air rushed out of his puffed cheeks and he said, “Okaaay.”

I didn’t know what convinced him—was it because Techii was the one talking, or was it because beer was involved? From what I’d heard, his father could hold his liquor as well, so it was probably a mix of both.

“Okay, so we’re all in agreement here,” I concluded. “I’ll prepare other meats, vegetables, and seafood so that all the kids can enjoy the barbecue party as well, so look forward to it, Kon.”

For a moment, Kon’s eyes lit up with excitement, but he immediately shook his head furiously. “I can’t wait for the barbecue, but! I’m more excited about making the sausages!” he stressed. “I want to make lots of yummy sausages and give them to everyone, not just you two! Like Mommy and Daddy! That’s why I’m gonna be one of the hosts! Not a guest! I’ll work *really* hard with you, Mikura!”

His voice was determined, and I could hear a resolve of steel. He stood up and started gathering all the plates on the low table. “That’s why I’m going to do the dishes and clean up today!” he announced. “I’m gonna work hard like Mommy and you!”

He lifted the pile of plates and carried it over to the kitchen between grunts of effort. My heart swelled, as if someone had lit a gentle hearth inside. I got to my feet steadily and quietly walked toward him, careful not to give him a nasty shock. Then, as his assistant, I began cleaning up.

Barbecue, Sausages, and Dresses Galore!

ON the next day, I spent the entire morning doing housework. I would usually head to the orchard after I was done, but not today. I was a man on a mission.

And it just so happened that this particular mission had to be done before the sausage session. What is it, you ask? Well...I had to taste Mr. Oinu's dried hon-shimeji. I needed to know what flavors it had and how much umami it packed. Depending on the results, I would adjust the amount I mixed in and the seasoning I paired with it. It would be heinous of me to use it in sausages without such knowledge. This step was imperative. Or at least, that was how I convinced myself as I gingerly laid out dried hon-shimeji on a chopping board next to the sink.

Kon, stationed at his usual spot, hummed merrily. "Oh, we're eating *that* today! I had that yesterday too, as a stir-fry with other veggies!"

Ah, that reminds me. Hon-shimeji isn't a high-grade ingredient around here. Rather, they're common mushrooms you can procure whenever you want.

"Calling it eating is a tad inaccurate," I said. "It's more like a tasting session. If I want to use them in other recipes, like sausages, I need to understand how they would affect the taste. That's why we aren't making anything fancy today, so don't get your hopes up."

Today is a taste test of a new ingredient, so the cooking process is rather simple. Cut the dried hon-shimeji into bite-size chunks. Fill a small pot with water and boil it over the stove. Place an appropriate amount of dried mushrooms into the bubbling water and turn to low heat. Simmer until their flavor permeates the water, and you're good to go.

Don't add any seasoning or spices during the first test. Ladle out some mushroom broth into a small dish. Once cool, take a small sip and hold it in your mouth.

It wasn't a proper dish at all, so I didn't have high expectations for the broth.

However, the moment the broth entered my mouth, I could feel the umami taste and aroma tyrannically filling my mouth and nose. The taste must have been enhanced by the drying process. It might sound like an exaggeration, but I almost had a dizzy spell from the impact.

Whoa, the umami of the hon-shimeji in the Wilds is remarkably stronger than the ones I know. The hon-shimeji I'm used to are classified as "fancy" for good reason—every taste feels like a bite of bliss. But this is on a whole other level... True, the umami flavor must have been concentrated by the drying process, but my gut is telling me that I'm correct.

Is this the power of the Fusang trees as well? I wondered. That being said, though the umami is striking, the broth itself isn't flavorful enough to be a soup on its own. It's just hot water with the earthy umami of mushrooms. That won't do, I need to test a little more to figure out the flavor compatibility.

I reached for the bottle of soy sauce and drizzled some into the broth. *Now it's a plain soup with some flavor.* I did another taste test. *Mmm, much better. A bit of saltiness goes a long way since the broth already has strong umami. Hey, you know what? I think I know something that'll go perfectly with this soup.*

Heading to the fridge, I fetched some okra, sliced them, and added them to the pot. I waited until it boiled again before ladling out a small sample of soup with okra and mushrooms into a small dish. I drank, making sure that I consumed some of the okra and mushrooms as well. *Well, well. That was an excellent idea. It's not yet the best season for okra, but its mild grassy flavor and crunchy texture are a nearly flawless combination. With the addition of the soy sauce and okra, the umami of the mushrooms stands out even more, and—*

"Mikura!" A voice brought me back to the present. It was Kon, whose cheeks were puffed out like a hamster as he protested, "That looks yummy! You *are* making proper food! Can I have some too?!"

I glanced at Kon, then the pot, then back at Kon again. *Oh. I didn't realize I got carried away and started making actual soup.* "Sorry about that," I apologized after I got over my surprise.

After I grabbed a bowl and a pair of chopsticks, I served some soup to Kon. "It ended up as more than a tasting session," I said, "but don't get too excited. I

added ingredients on a whim without thinking about the order and best timing.”

Kon held up his bowl with both hands and took a long sip. With his chopsticks, he picked up some mushrooms and okra, which soon ended up in his mouth. I could hear the crunch and squish of the ingredients as he chewed slowly, savoring the taste.

“I knew it!” he exclaimed. “It’s yummy! It’s the taste I’m used to.” He dove back into the soup and eagerly drank it all up.

He considered it delicious but wasn’t as shaken as I was. Knowing Kon, it must be his honest reaction and opinion. *Huh... His reaction is rather mild for something with such strong umami. Maybe he got used to it because it’s a common ingredient here, or maybe it doesn’t taste that strong to beastfolk tastebuds.*

I wouldn’t be surprised if it was the latter. Apparently, one’s preferences for types of mushrooms are remarkably different depending on their eating habits or culture. In Japan, the matsutake mushroom is considered a delicious, high-class ingredient, but I hear that Western society doesn’t hold it in as high esteem. Meanwhile, the popular truffles in the West have a mixed reception in Japan. I don’t know what Kon’s reason is, but I should keep it in mind when I use hon-shimeji.

In my mind, I started contemplating how I would use the mushrooms in different recipes.

That was when Kon called out to me. “Thanks for the food! But uh, Mikura, you didn’t use meat in the soup. Uncle said that the mushrooms go well with meat, so...” He paused dramatically and clasped his hands together in a pleading gesture. “Could you please try that too, sir?”

Sir. That was one title I never expected to hear from him. He was probably desperately trying to hide his true intentions, and that title slipped out to butter me up. However, the truth was crystal clear—the devil in his heart was voicing his desire to feast on meat.

I couldn’t help it. I burst into laughter.

Kon realized his slip-up as well. He covered his face with both hands, and his tail fell limp, despondent. Then, he curled up into a ball, hiding himself from the world.

I cleared my throat to stop my laughing fit. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh. It just came out. Okay, how about this? As an apology, I’ll make something with meat and mushrooms for lunch today. Since we’re thinking about using the hon-shimeji in sausages, we should definitely test out its compatibility with meat.”

Humming in thought, I continued, “Should I go simple and do a stir-fry? Or should I make meat sauce pasta? Hmm, meatballs with diced hon-shimeji sounds like a great combination too. The minced meat will lock away the juicy mushrooms, creating meatballs with potent umami flavor and a nice, fleshy texture. Now drizzle on some thick dashi sauce and garnish with shredded white spring onion... I like the sound of that.”

Throughout my speech, Kon’s tail slowly, but surely, started rising back up. At the mention of “stir-fry,” it wound up just a tad. At “meat sauce pasta,” it rose a lot higher. Finally, at “meatballs,” it jerked up furiously. Then, Kon’s hands flew off his face, revealing his large, bright eyes that were filled with anticipation.

Meatball it is. But first, I had some cleaning up to do. I gathered the cookware and dishes I’d used for the broth and got busy.



“**THE** secret to making good meatballs,” I said once I finished the dishes and started preparations, “is to add a binding agent of some sort and to avoid adding too many additional ingredients.”

Kon was swinging his legs on his chair as he asked, “Why can’t we add too many? Having more yummy ingredients sounds like it’ll be tastier.”

“Well, if you do, the meatballs won’t be nice and round when you cook them. They’ll crumble. If there’re more additional ingredients than meat, it’ll overpower the meat’s taste, which would be a shame. Having less is just right. In exchange, I often choose ingredients that have a prominent taste. The classics are onions and cheese, but bamboo shoots work well too. The crunchiness of bamboo shoots really adds to the texture of the meatballs, you

see. And of course, diced mushrooms are a great choice. I recommend the juicier and fleshier mushrooms.”

“Bamboo shoots! I love them! Rice with bamboo shoots is one of my favorite meals!”

“I think you’d love meatballs with chopped bamboo shoots, then. Unfortunately, we’ll have to save that for a later date. Today, the star of the show is hon-shimeji.”

By the end of our conversation, I’d finished the prep work.

For meatballs, I prefer to process each ingredient individually before mixing them together. First is the binding agent, a mixture of panko breadcrumbs and milk. Second are the mushrooms. Cut the mushrooms into small pieces, but not too small, because you want to keep their fleshy texture. This step might not be necessary since hon-shimeji are already flavorful, but just in case, stir-fry them in the frying pan and season them lightly with salt.

Add minced meat, the binding agent, eggs, and mushrooms to a mixing bowl. Combine the ingredients gently.

As I mixed the bowl, Kon asked, “Mikura, you said that you’re going to drizzle a thick dashi sauce on the meatballs like a normal Japanese *ankake* dish. Are ankake meatballs tasty? I’ve never eaten such a combination before.”

“Very much so,” I replied. “It’s one of my favorite recipes, and the meatballs are mouthwatering. When using Japanese cuisine ingredients such as bamboo shoots, hon-shimeji, or shiitake mushrooms, thick dashi sauce works better than Western alternatives. That’s my opinion, at least. For meatballs, I prefer using soy sauce as the key ingredient in my thick dashi sauce, and the taste is outstanding.

“There are a lot of ways to cook meatballs,” I continued. “Boiled ankake meatballs dashi sauce on fried meatballs and sprinkling on shredded spring onion... Pure bliss, I tell you.”

The response from Kon was an audible gulp. I had the feeling that a grumble of his belly would soon follow, so I shouldn’t keep him waiting. I quickly rolled the kneaded minced meat into balls on my palm and lined them up on a

stainless-steel tray. Once I depleted my supply of minced meat, I washed my hands and piled up all the dirty cookware in one corner—they had served their purpose. Next, I prepared two pots, one for frying and a small one for making the sauce.

Boiling meatballs in hot water is valid as well, but when served with thick dashi sauce, deep-frying is the only way to go. In the case of a pasta or soup dish, though, boiled ones are probably more fitting. In fact, you might as well cook the meatballs in the soup. I'm not saying that boiled meatballs are inferior to fried ones—they're actually healthier. But today, I'm sacrificing health for taste and frying those meatballs in a generous amount of oil heated to 350°F.

While waiting for the oil to heat up, make the thick dashi sauce. This step is much easier than the frying process. Combine water, soy sauce, dashi stock, mirin, cooking sake, and vinegar in a pot over low heat. Once it boils, turn off the fire and add in Japanese potato starch, mixing thoroughly so that the starch doesn't form clumps. And you're done. Easy, right? It's also delicious, so it's an essential recipe in Japanese cooking.

While waiting for the sauce and oil to heat, find a good time to cut the white spring onion into shreds. When the oil reaches the desired temperature, scoop up meatballs with a ladle and gently sink them into the oil. Fry for roughly three minutes, then remove from oil with a slotted ladle. Allow all the oil to drain out before placing it on a plate.

Pour on thick dashi sauce once all the meatballs are done and use chopsticks to toss the meatballs slightly in the sauce. For the finishing touch, sprinkle on the shredded spring onions to garnish. There you have it, fried meatballs in thick dashi sauce.

No sooner had I finished the ankake meatballs than Techii arrived home for lunch. A thunderous and lengthy rumble from Kon's stomach welcomed her entrance. Like every other day, I wiped the low table surface, laid out the main dish together with rice and miso soup, and signaled the beginning of lunch.

All three of us settled down in our usual seats and voiced our thanks for the food. Food was always better when hot, so I dug in right away. My first target was, of course, the plate of ankake meatballs. The savory taste of dashi and soy

sauce was the first thing that hit me. Then, there was a delectable crunch as I bit into the meat, and the rich flavors melted in my mouth. With it came the strong umami and fleshy mushroom texture of hon-shimeji, making every moment a delight.

I almost felt like Goldilocks—the flavor was just right, the amount was just right, and the texture was just right. No matter how many meatballs I ate, it didn't get dull at all. In the blink of an eye, my rice was gone. *You know, I think I could polish off several bowls of rice paired with this dish alone.* I almost forgot to mention the shredded spring onions, an excellent garnish that added a nice touch to the texture and taste. Every bite was worth its weight in gold, and I couldn't get enough of it.

Looks like I have a new regular recipe in my inventory.

"Yuum-eee!" Kon exclaimed. "Oooh, I wonder whether Mommy can make this too! It tastes so Japanese!"

Techi, meanwhile, didn't spare a single word as she moved rice and meatballs into her mouth repeatedly like a machine. *Uh, since it's fried, this dish has quite a lot of calories. She might worry about putting on weight if she eats too much... but it'd be boorish of me to make such a comment while she's enjoying the food. She swings that heavy staff every day, which would be good exercise. Yeah, I'm sure this won't make too much of a difference.*

Kon's merry voice cut into my thoughts. "Mikura! I'm sure the sausages would taste good with the mushrooms too!"

I nodded, swallowed the food in my mouth, then replied, "Yep, I agree. The hon-shimeji's umami is more overpowering than I thought, but if I adjust the recipe with that in mind, I'm sure we'll get good results. It doesn't seem like it would go well with herbs, so we'll either have to use mushrooms as the sole ingredient, or add a small amount of soy sauce or miso paste to give the sausages a Japanese hint. Hmm, it's a tough decision."

I paused, brainstorming for ideas. "I was planning on making sausages with cheese chunks as well, so I guess I could specialize? Making two types, Western and Japanese, might be the best idea. The ones with hon-shimeji can be Japanese-style."

Techi chewed on her food quickly like a hamster, swallowed it to free her mouth, and joined in. “Hey, don’t forget the cartilage ones. I’m also looking forward to the cabbage, onions, and bamboo shoots.”

“But of course.” I nodded firmly.

A look of satisfaction overtook her face, and Techie fed another meatball into her mouth, getting to work again.

To tell you the truth, I’d made many meatballs, thinking that I could leave some for dinner. At the rate she was going, however, it seemed that I had to make dinner from scratch. *I mean, I’m not complaining. The greatest compliment you can give to a cook is to enjoy and finish all their food. I’m guilty of the same thing too, I ate more than I expected because it’s just too good.*

The thought made my mouth water, and I couldn’t help but pick up another meatball from the plate. By the end of lunch, none of the meatballs survived, and all of us rubbed our full bellies. Lunchtime that day was a little longer than usual—while we digested our food, we all absentmindedly stared at the TV while indulging in tea.



UNFORTUNATELY, rain took over the skies the next morning, and it had yet to stop. That meant none of the orchard work could be done, so all the children stayed in their homes, passing time with their hobbies or studying. Kon was one of them, and he was studying hard at home.

Of course, there was some work that had to be done no matter what mood the heavens were in, and during storms, special measures had to be put in place to protect the orchard. When necessary, the kids would put on rain gear and continue their work, according to Techie. However, the orchard was well maintained, and normal rain didn’t call for such a response. Therefore, I had the pleasure of being with Techie at home since the morning. Time passed peacefully in good company.

We had idle talk, we did housework... The latter finished early thanks to her assistance. Once that was done, we relaxed in the living room, drinking tea and watching TV. We chatted about all kinds of things, nothing noteworthy but important all the same. Frankly, the topics were all inconsequential, but we

never ran out of patience or things to talk about.

In the background, rain showered down like the faint tinkling of a distant xylophone, not too loud to intrude. From what I could hear from the TV, a TV special about weddings had just begun. I glanced at Techī, and her eyes were glued to the screen. I fell silent so that I wouldn't disturb her.

During the commercial break, I called out to her. "Hey, Techī, what kind of dress do you want to wear during our wedding?"

She looked a little startled, her eyes wide. Then, she shook her head. "I haven't really thought about it. The thing is, we don't have such practices in the Wilds. Even if we *do* dress up, it would be wearing a white *shiromuku* kimono at a shrine at most. I've seen Western wedding dresses on TV before, and I think that they're pretty, but I'll probably never have the chance to wear one."

"Weeell... In my opinion, following customs is admirable, but why not wear one if you want to? It would cost a fortune if we bought one, but renting one is definitely affordable, so it's worth a try. Beastfolk weddings involve a banquet after the ceremony itself, right? You can wear it then and show it off to everyone. I'm sure that more people will want to follow in your footsteps, and it might even turn into a new custom."

Even from a slight distance, the smile that bloomed on her face was so wide that her joy was clear as day. And then, she started fidgeting, as if she didn't know what to say or do.

After a few restless minutes, she gasped. "Right, the color! Wh-What color should we pick?!" she stammered.

"You're the one wearing it, so you should pick something you like. You could pick your favorite color, or decide after browsing a pamphlet of a boutique. Ah, but... If there isn't a custom of wearing wedding dresses around here, I guess there won't be any rental bridal boutiques nearby, huh?"

I propped up my chin with my palm and started contemplating. "In that case, we'll have to pick something on the other side of the border. A boutique near the foot of the mountain would be ideal. We might have to pay a higher handling fee, but I'm sure they can deliver it here." I nodded to myself. "Either way, we won't know until we try. I'll make a call to ask. If there aren't any

issues, let's get them to send us a pamphlet."

Fishing out my phone, I started consulting the Internet. After finding an appropriate boutique phone number, I prepared to dial it, but stopped in my tracks. There was someone else I should ask first. This time, I dialed the phone number of Mr. Kaōin, which he had given me a while ago.

Since it was a delivery from the other side of the border, Mr. Kaōin was going to be the one taking care of the job. He should also be familiar with asking for approval from the boutique and other processes like the decontamination of the dress. He was my best consultant, especially considering his background. Rather than an amateur like me fumbling around, asking for his help with the details would be better for everyone.

After a few rings, I got an answer. "Hello, this is Kaōin speaking," he said.

I gave him my name, greeted him, then dove into the main reason I'd called him. As I explained, from time to time, Mr. Kaōin would interject in a chipper voice, "Oh, I see" or "Yes, I'm listening."

When I was finished, he gave me the most heartening answer possible. "Please leave all the details to me. Once we draft up a more concrete plan, I shall pass on the details to you. As for the pamphlet, I shall do everything within my power so that I can deliver it as soon as possible."

I voiced my profound gratitude.

His voice grew even more animated as he continued, "That's all right. I am only doing what I want to do."

After we exchanged a few words, the conversation ended. And from what I could observe, Techī, a beastwoman with exceptional hearing, had heard every single word. She puffed out her rose-red cheeks, possibly a subconscious habit when she was happy. Then, she turned her attention to the TV. I couldn't tell whether it was because she was feeling shy or because the program had resumed after the commercials.

Just in case, I relayed Mr. Kaōin's response to her. "He promised he would attend to our request as soon as he could. I'm sure we can leave it in his capable hands. As for the price, well... The price range should be within our

budget, so after the pamphlet arrives, you can choose one you like and wear it during our wedding. How does that sound? And, uh, just to be sure, you can do your bridal hair and makeup in the Wilds, right? I assume there are beauty salons.”

Techi fixed her gaze on the TV, her chin propped on her palm while her elbow rested on the low table. Her arm was facing me, as if she wanted to obscure her expression. Her reply was a short “Yes.”

After that, her eyes were practically glued to the screen. She watched the program with a focus many times sharper than earlier. Whenever a new dress was displayed on the screen, the ears on top of her head and her tail would twitch in response.

Meanwhile, I found my eyes glued to her ears and tail. *I never knew they could react like this.* Suddenly, I realized something I should have considered from the beginning. *Wait, I forgot about her tail. How is this going to work with the dress? From what I know, she should be able to let it hang down if she wants. I guess she'll have to keep it down the entire time while she's wearing the dress, and only the tip of her tail would peek out from the skirt's hem.*

She usually wore trousers that had a special hole that wrapped around her tail base snugly, keeping her underwear and rear out of sight. But since we were renting, asking the boutique to make such an adjustment would be unreasonable of us. *If that's the case, should we just go all out and order a custom-made one instead? We could pass it down to our children, to our grandkids, and so on. Or we could lend it to the other girls who yearn to dress up during one of the most important days of their lives.*

It will be expensive, yes, but equally meaningful. But...I repeat, it's expensive. It'll burn a hole in our wallets. Fancy dresses don't come cheap, and wedding dresses in particular are infamous for how high the numbers can get.

I came to the conclusion that I should discuss such matters with Techī once again after the TV program ended. But for now, I silently admired Techī's face from the side. She seemed so happy, so *overjoyed*, that her eyes were more brilliant than even a curtain of stars in the night sky.



MR. Kaōin called in the morning the next day, and Techī left for a clothes shop deep in the forest. For a wedding dress, measurements were essential, like her height, her shoulder width, and so on. However, we couldn't ask the boutique staff to come all the way to the Wilds just for measurements, and Techī couldn't head to the other side of the border either. Therefore, she would get her measurements at a local clothes shop and send her data digitally.

During the call, I'd brought up my question about the tail as well, but Mr. Kaōin had been a step ahead of me. Though I didn't know the nitty-gritty of how we'd solve that issue, Mr. Kaōin had reassured me that he would take care of it. He'd said that he would contact me about the details once there was progress.

Since Techī was occupied today, someone had to take her place as the children's overseer, and there was one obvious candidate for the job.

When I went to the rest area in the orchard, I saw the man I expected: Rei, my brother-in-law to-be.

After the roll call ended without incident, the children sprinted toward the trees. We fell into casual conversation. A while later, I said, "Thank you for always helping us. But, um, is it *really* okay? What about your *pâtisserie*?"

Rei replied with an easygoing laugh. "Nah, don't fret about it. It's completely fine. For you see, the pastries I was planning on selling today are—" He lowered his voice to a dramatic and secretive whisper. "—*long* done! I prepped last night and did a marathon starting at the witching hour this morning! Now that I own a proper *pâtisserie*, my shop can run smoothly even without me present. Sometimes the staff will call me in if our desserts sell too quickly and they need me to make extra, but that never happens unless it's the weekend or a holiday."

He continued, "As for other tasks like delivery or replenishing ingredients, the staff I hired can take care of those. If I put my mind to it, I can come here every day."

"Um..." I hesitated. "Usually, people who work night shifts or in the early morning need to make up for lost sleep during noon. I know I might sound like I'm nagging, but health is the one thing you shouldn't gamble with."

Rei waved his hand flippantly. "It's not like I'm doing manual labor or sprinting

around the forest. It works out somehow. I live with my parents, and Mom takes care of all the chores, so I have it easier than the people working and taking care of themselves. But whatever, this doesn't matter. Let's talk about important stuff." He leaned forward with zeal. "So, you're the one who spurred Tokatechi on to wear a wedding dress, hm? What a suave gentleman we have here!"

"Ah, yes, kind of." I searched for the right words. "I'll be honest, a part of me wants to do this for her because it would make her happy, but more than anything else, I want to see her in a wedding dress. So, well... I can't deny that half of it is my selfish desire talking."

Rei's eyes grew huge before he broke out in hearty laughter. "Oooh, I see, I getcha! Trouble and money are meager sacrifices compared to seeing your *amour* in a gorgeous wedding dress, eh? I'm with you on this one. I want to see the love of my life in a lavish dress one day as well. I'll dedicate that scene to my memory."

"Oh, you keep someone close to your heart as well, Rei? I have the feeling that Techichi might start a trend of wedding dresses in the Wilds, so maybe that day won't be too far off."

I didn't think before I spoke. The words just came out naturally. Rei was in a relationship as well, the couple was affectionate, and their wedding was just around the corner. I was completely convinced that was the case until Rei's shoulders drooped despondently.

"Well..." His eyes grew unfocused. "Would have been great if that was the case. But it just won't work out..."

Realizing that I had touched on a sensitive topic, I thought, for a moment, about changing the subject. But Rei seemed like he wanted me to lend him an ear, so I decided to probe right into the heart of the matter. "May I ask about the woman that stole your heart? Who is she?"

"Oh! You're willing to hear me out? Weeell, that's kind of a long story. Actually, maybe not. Okay, I'll get to the point. Remember the staff I just mentioned? So there's a person who's managing my *pâtisserie* on my behalf right this moment. She's the one. She's a really cute girl, and not just that.

Hardworking, smart... She's such a lovely person, but the twist is that I'm her *boss*."

He let out a long sigh. "I mean, I'm her employer, right? And as her employer, I don't know how to ask her out, or whether I should confess to begin with. I dunno how to explain, but I feel like it'd be sexual harassment? Or putting her in a tough spot because I'm in a position of power?"

"Ahhh, I know what you mean."

Hearing that reply opened Rei's floodgates. He finally had an outlet, and he started a lengthy and passionate speech about his beloved.

Rei often had to leave his shop for his family's sake, just like today, but never once did she complain. Instead, she always gave him her unwavering support. She shared the same interest in desserts, and she'd even tried to make some on her own. They were always on the same wavelength, and before they realized it, they would talk hours away without stopping. When he was with her, nothing could be wrong with the world.

As such, Rei was bound to fall for this charming woman. She was fun to talk to, had a great personality, and matched his ideals even in looks. They had known each other for a long time, and to Rei, she was already more than a coworker, more than a friend—she was family. He wanted to take their relationship to the next step, and to eventually live together. Every day, he dreamed of asking for her hand in marriage.

His words kept spilling out like a waterfall until a loud rustling sound, clear as crystal, even with Rei's voice ringing out, interrupted him. It seemed to come from the forest, as if something was pushing through the shrubs and leaves. We both grew tense immediately, thinking that perhaps a boar had wandered onto the property. Together, we whipped our heads around to look at the source.

The sight caught me by surprise. A beastwoman stood there, and the adorable ears on her head reminded me of a puppy. She wore an apron, and on it were the words "Kurikara Cakes." On reflex, I turned to look at the shop owner and *pâtissier*, Arurei Kurikara. His face was spectacularly pale, and cold sweat slid down his face like a scene from a manga.

His voice was shaky. "U-Uh, I thought you were looking after the shop...?"

A dust of pink was visible on the woman's cheeks as she replied in a soft, sweet voice, "The part-timer Minami came in today, so I left the shop in his care while I, um... I baked a little something a while ago, and I wanted you to have a taste, and I, well, I... I thought I'd pay you a visit."



And as a result of that, she'd ended up overhearing our conversation. She finally worked up the courage to walk forward and show herself, and her stance on the matter was clear from her voice and her attitude. Without another word, I left to give the pair some privacy. *I'm sure they don't need a third wheel tagging along. I'll just leave you two lovebirds alone.*

After making that clichéd statement in my mind, I furtively headed toward the children, making myself as inconspicuous as possible. While the pair worked things out between themselves, the children taught me how to care for the chestnut trees.



I heard from Rei afterward that they were an official couple starting today. They had come to an agreement that they would first work on a lasting relationship at their own pace before thinking about taking the next step, such as marriage. That was when the question surfaced in my mind. A while ago, Techī had said that many beastfolk would gain a future spouse during their childhood jobs. Was that not the case for Rei or his partner, Miss Yasaka?

I voiced my question, and according to him, they both had such candidates but went separate ways in the end. Some matched pairs get along well as children, and their friendship eventually evolves into romance, but other pairs see each other as siblings instead of life partners. Once they are old enough to understand the significance of love and marriage, they will inherently grow distant. It wasn't rare at all.

In Rei's case, he'd committed a significant part of his life to his *pâtissier* training, wholeheartedly making sweets instead of working. That was part of the reason he and his former girlfriend broke up. Miss Yasaka parted ways with her ex for her own reasons as well. And now, fate brought them together, and they found love in each other. They were a very fortunate couple.

While Rei was busy moving to a new stage of his life, Techī finished taking her measurements without incident. I sent the data to Mr. Kaōin. Once he finished his ongoing preparations, we could hire a dress whenever we wanted to.

I discussed it with Techī. We hadn't decided on a specific date for our wedding, but perhaps we could hold it immediately after the dress was ready

and delivered.



A few days slipped by, and it was the long-anticipated Sunday—the day of the barbecue and sausage party, which Tech and Kon had been waiting for with bated breath. I'd already bought all the necessary ingredients for the barbecue on the previous day. As for the barbecue grills, I'd heard that Rei and Mr. Oinu owned one each, and I'd borrowed both in advance. They were ready to go anytime in the garden—I only had to set fire to them. I'd also borrowed folding chairs, folding tables, and picnic blankets from the pair. In the garden, there were even parasols and reclining camp chairs that Rei had installed of his own accord.

A barbecue wouldn't be a barbecue without meat, and I'd done all the preparations the day before. I'd marinated meat in sauce, I'd beaten meat or sprayed fruit juice onto the surface to tenderize the pieces, so on and so forth. Thinking that I might as well make a barbecue sauce of my own, I had done exactly that. All the materials for the sausages were available, and I'd already done a trial run of the sausage making set. Of course, there was also beer waiting patiently in the chilly bin.

All the checkboxes were checked, and I was ready to begin the main event at any time. The one thing that was missing, for some reason, were the guests who were supposed to show up.

Tech had disappeared somewhere in the morning. I'd invited my parents-in-law in case they were interested, but they were nowhere to be seen, and neither were Rei and Miss Yasaka. Kon came early in the morning, but his parents hadn't arrived. The Oinu couple was just as absent as the rest.

With my apron wrapped against my frame, I was standing on the veranda when I glanced at the time. "It's almost nine, the time it's supposed to start..." I sighed and turned sideways to Kon, who was wearing his full coverall apron gear like last time. "Oh well, standing here waiting won't get us anywhere, so shall we get a head start?"

Kon shook his head slowly with disapproval, as if to say, "Those adults are more childish than me!" He looked up at me and gave me an affirming nod.

“In that case, our top priority is making the sausages,” I said. “I explained how to use the set and briefed the basic sausage recipe yesterday, but let’s go over it again just in case.”

“Okaaay!” Kon chirped, his eyes shut with his signature smile.

We moved to the kitchen and dove into our sausage-making session. I gave a rundown of the recipe to Kon to refresh his memory.

The first step of making any sausage is preparing the casings. Most of the commercial casings are left in a salted brine. Take out as many as you need and soak in clean water to remove the salt.

The second step is the main ingredient in sausages, the filling. Mix minced meat, seasoning, and ice with your hands. The sausage-making set I bought comes with a meat grinder, but I’m skipping that step this time. Buying ready-made minced meat from a shop saves me a lot of time and effort.

If you’re wondering why I add ice, it’s to keep the meat cold. If the meat warms up, the fats and grease will rise to the surface and separate from the meat, ruining its texture. Or at least, that’s what I hear. Adding ice to the meat isn’t enough—you should also chill your hands in ice first. Knead the mixture for approximately five minutes. Remove the ice. Stuff the meat into the casings, cook the sausages, and they’re ready to eat.

“Let’s start with cheese chunk sausages,” I said. “Dice the cheese into the smallest regular cubes possible. Place the chunks in a bowl and combine with minced meat. As for seasoning, well, it’s more of a preference thing, but the standard set is salt, pepper, sugar, and nutmeg. You’d sometimes add a few additional herbs.”

During my lecture, I placed cheese blocks on chopping boards and cut them carefully with Kon. “If you want to turn your sausages into preserves, this is the stage where you would add preservatives, but we’re skipping that step this time because we’re eating them right away. I hear that in Central Asia, they used to add saltpeter as preservatives to their sausages. Unbelievable, right?”

After dicing the cheese, prepare the seasoning and place it separately in a small bowl. Swiftly throw in minced meat, ice, cheese, and seasoning mixture into a bowl.

Time was of the essence, and together with Kon, I kneaded the mixture quickly.

Chill your hands in a bowl of ice. Squeeze out and drain the water as you knead the meat so that it doesn't get runny. After five minutes, it's time to introduce the star of the sausage-making set, the sausage gun.

There are a few ways of filling the sausage cases, and piping bags are one such example. The piping bag is identical to the type you would use for icing and whipped cream. Fill the piping bag with the sausage filling, insert the tip into the casing, and squeeze it in. The downside of this method is that, without experience, you might have trouble squeezing the meat in, the meat might end up lumpy, and you might even accidentally tear the casing. I honestly don't recommend this method to an amateur.

I'd once bought sausage piping bags because they seemed like what a *real* dedicated chef would use. The trial had been nothing but disaster—the casing split apart, and in the end, I had to sauté all the minced meat in the frying pan instead. *So yes, you can trust my advice, because I'm speaking from my foolish experience.*

On the other end of the spectrum, sausage caulking guns are useful tools I'd recommend to someone starting out. It looks like a large plastic tube with a nozzle, a grip, and a trigger. Nearly anyone would find success with these.

Fill the sausage gun with the cheese chunk sausage stuffing. Insert the nozzle into the desalinated casing. Use your hands to steady the casing and the gun, then pull the trigger.

Kon was on trigger duty, since he'd been itching to try it.

"Easy does it," I said. "As long as you keep your hands steady and squeeze in the meat at a regular speed, you'll be fine. All right, shall we start?" I gave him a big nod.

With a grave expression on his face, like a soldier on duty, Kon sucked in a deep breath. There was a clicking sound as he finally pulled the trigger.

As you pull, the meat slithers in smoothly. The tool squeezes the meat out with constant force, creating a uniform and neat sausage.

“WOOOW!” Kon exclaimed. “Look at that! It’s turning into a sausage!”

Once a sizable segment of the casing started puffing out into a round shape, we stopped pouring in the meat. I asked Kon to hold the sausage gun and freed my hand that was supporting it. I promptly grabbed the sausage and twisted it several times. The sausage casing was robust enough to withstand some handling.

The proper recipe for sausages doesn’t just call for twisting. You’re supposed to use a specific tying method to link the sausages into a shape that’s easier for drying and hanging. I’m skipping that this time because we’re eating them right away. Instead, focus on the intervals between the twists that determine the size of each sausage segment.

We repeated this process until the sausage gun was empty. I took the nozzle out, cut off the excess casing with scissors, and tied it.

I admired our handiwork. “Great, the cheese sausage is done! Let’s grab a pot and cook it right away.”

I left the sausage to rest on the chopping board for now and fetched a large pot. As I filled it with water, I noticed Kon was doing something rather tasteful. Kon posed with the empty sausage gun like a Wild West outlaw who’d just finished a quick draw duel. He looked moved beyond words as he began shaking it.

“I made a sausage! I made a *sausage!*” he cheered.

I felt a smile grow on my face as I glanced at him while I moved the pot onto the stove. I turned on the heat and waited for it to boil. During my free time, I accepted the sausage gun from our little hero and dismantled it, scrubbed it with a brush, and cleaned it so that it would be ready for the next round.

“Sorry for pouring cold water on your fun, but we’re only getting started,” I reminded him. “Next up is a Japanese-style sausage with dried hon-shimeji we received from Mr. Oinu. After that is the vegetable-packed sausage with cabbage and onion. Then, we have the herb and cartilage pair. Last but not least is the dashi and bamboo shoot sausage. You’ve got your work cut out for you, Kon!”

His eyes were practically sparkling as he nodded furiously. He slowly sat down on his chair, replenishing his energy for the next trigger, and raised his chin with dignity.

I suppressed a small chuckle at the sight. By now, I'd mostly finished cleaning out the sausage gun, and the water had reached its boiling point. I slid in the sausage, set up the cooking timer, and waited for two minutes. This step was probably unnecessary since we were eating it immediately—we could just chuck it on the barbecue without heating. However, it was always better to be safe than sorry, and that was the policy I adopted in my household.

During the wait, I resumed cleanup and washed the dishes. When the sausage was ready, I arranged it on a large plate and left it on the countertop to cool. Back to cleaning I went, and once everything was nice and pristine, I restarted the process from scratch.

The second sausage on the menu today is the dried hon-shimeji sausage. Chop the mushrooms into small pieces, but not too small, so that you can retain their fleshy texture. Soy sauce is the seasoning this time, and the rest of the steps are identical. Knead, squeeze, boil. Rinse and repeat.

The sausage-making session took up a lot of our time. By the end, several large plates decorated the kitchen counter, and I covered the cooled sausages with plastic wrap.

I frowned as I started tidying up. “No one showed up in the end... I mean, I know that some people said that they'll come around noon, but still!” I huffed.

What followed my grumbling was the whirring of a car engine. I recognized it as Rei's delivery van. Judging by the sound, it parked at a slight distance from the garden. There were two sounds of van doors opening and closing.

Rei's voice echoed out from the veranda. “Heya! Sorry, I'm a bit late. Oh, you haven't lit the barbecues yet?”

I looked over to the veranda and saw Rei and Miss Yasaka. Pausing my cleanup process, I replied, “You're the first to arrive. Techii also went off and hasn't come back. That aside, we finished making the sausages. The meat, vegetables, and sauces are all ready too, so you can start eating whenever you want.”

“Hooray for that!” Rei cheered. “Hey, I’ll borrow some space in the warehouse fridge. I whipped up a bunch of desserts, but it’s probably gonna take a while before we get to the sugary stuff, so I’ll store them in there for now. I’ll light the barbecues, so you can get back to preparing the food.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” I replied. “Most of my work is already done, though.”

Rei waved at me lightheartedly as he returned to his van with Miss Yasaka. After he transferred the desserts, he started lighting the charcoal in the barbecue grills. I’d borrowed one of the grills from him, so he was likely a master in this regard. As I tidied up, I stole glances at him. Everything seemed to be going smoothly.

A while later, we had new guests.

“Yo! Might be sorta late to the party, but never absent!” a gruff voice rang out. “Sweet, looks like I came atta good time, things are just startin’ out. Oh? I see that look on yer face, Arurei, and I know what it means. Yer thinkin’, ‘This fella came late on purpose so that he arrives after the prep work is done! He wants ta slack off!’ Yep, ya got that right. Ya shouldn’t’ve expected any help from a good ole raccoon dog like me to begin with.

“But hey, I brought the good stuff with me as peace offerings. My wife made rice balls so good that they’re on par with Mikura’s. And would ya look at this! One of the finest sake liquors in my collection!”

Looks like the Oinu couple has arrived, I noted. Techī’s parents and Kon’s parents were only a step behind, and they came in to greet me. As the garden grew increasingly lively, Rei came inside the house to fetch the vegetables and meat from the fridge. He took entire trays and carried them right into the barbecue area. Soon, the clinking of beer cans and the sizzling of meat permeated the garden, along with a mouthwatering aroma.

“Kon,” I said, “cleanup is nearly done, so you can head over first and join in the fun.”

He shook his head and glanced at the counter—at the display of plates. “Sausages are the only thing on my mind right now! Wherever the sausages are, I’ll go!”

The sausages were the second dish he'd ever made in his life. The plethora of sausages was a step above the omelet he'd made last time in terms of taste, not to mention that Kon had an intense appreciation for meat. Like a hawk stalking prey, his gaze was glued to the products of our hard work.

"If you say so," I said, shaking my head slightly with a small smile. "It won't take too long." I hurried along, finishing up the last of the cleanup.

That was when I heard a commotion in the garden. "Whoa! Is that venison? Heck, I didn't think I'd get to munch on freshly hunted deer meat!" It was Mr. Oinu's voice. "Ya go, girl! Tokatechi, yer the best!"

I barely made out Tech's reply in the hustle and bustle. *Oh, she went off on a hunt! That was why she disappeared!* I gaped in surprise.

"Hey, Mikura, uh..." Kon said feebly. "I think we need to make more sausages."

"Sounds like it," I replied in slight resignation and began to prepare the meat grinder, which I hadn't expected to use today.



THE deer that Tech had brought back as a trophy turned out to be quite a magnificent one. I did a double take when I saw the bulky butchered venison she carried over. The amount she had was perfect for barbecuing, and I made that suggestion, but then she said, "Can you turn all this into sausages? I'm dying to know what venison sausage taste like."

And who was I to refuse the hunter responsible for the achievement? While Tech bathed and changed into fresh clothes, I started working on transforming all the meat into sausages. I looked up recipes on the Internet and skimmed through the top results. Apparently, there were two conflicting opinions about how one should process deer meat. One side said that making minced meat with a meat grinder was better, while the other claimed that turning it into mush with a food processor created a supreme taste.

In my opinion, practice was more important than theory in the realm of taste, so I decided to test both methods. I ended up making three flavors of sausages for each method: salt and pepper sausages; herb sausages with sage, rosemary,

thyme, and garlic; and curry powder sausages. For the food processing method, I would blend ice with the meat, while the grinder would make the minced meat. This made a total of six types of sausages.

Together with my assistant Kon, we toiled away until all the meat was gone. Half of the finished sausages were boiled, while the other half was directly grilled. Unlike the minced meat we bought, the venison was from fresh game—it wasn't even aged. Therefore, I didn't have to be as fussy about it compared to pork mince, which had to be treated carefully before consumption. Thus, our guests got to barbecue fresh sausages and eat them right away. As one would expect, they went wild.

I finally finished putting away all the cookware after the sausage-making encore. Kon took off his coverall apron, declaring that it was about time we joined in the feast. Last but not least, Techī, with languid contentment after a nice hot bath, came out in fresh attire. As a trio, we stepped into the boisterous barbecue venue and dug into steaming hot vegetables and sausages.

As I ate, I said, “You can eat the boiled sausages without grilling them. Just pick whichever you prefer. All the sausages are seasoned, so it's not necessary, but you can squeeze on some barbecue sauce or ketchup.”

Hearing that, Kon reacted right away. Nimbly, he ran up the folding table in the center of the venue and started a glaring contest with the plates on display. He took a small plate into one hand and armed the other with tongs. He swiftly reached for his first target, cheese sausages, and piled them on his plate.

Satisfied, he summoned his father, Mr. Sanmaya, and said, “Help me grill these!”

Mr. Sanmaya deftly laid out the sausages on the barbecue grill. While he was at it, he picked up the cooked vegetables and transferred them to Kon's plate. His selection was as follows: bell peppers, cabbage, and pumpkins. With a big smile, he thrust the plate forward at his son.

Kon's response was to puff out his cheeks, as if to say, “Who needs veggies?” With reluctance, he accepted the plate and a pair of chopsticks that his father also offered. He plopped down on the table and quietly munched on his food.

I glanced over at Techī, who went at full throttle from the very beginning. She

barbecued sausages while devouring one boiled venison sausage after another during the wait. She hummed and began her food review. “Interesting. The mince type is somewhat bland, but has the charm of a rustic dish. But I can’t argue that the mush type is at another degree of perfection... The seasoning has blended well into the meat. Mmm, I didn’t expect the curry one to be so good.”

As for me, well... There was one clear winner for my first sausage. I piled the hon-shimeji sausages on a small plate and started barbecuing them.

Leaving sausages on the grill for too long will cause the casing to break open, and their delectable juices will go to waste. Watch your sausages carefully so that you remove them right before they split apart. Barbecue the sausage until thoroughly cooked through and slightly browned. Remove from the grill. Allow it to cool slightly before consumption.

I took a big bite of my sausage, and the skin broke apart with a satisfying snap. An intense umami flavor filled my mouth as the meat juices seeped out and met my tongue. Before I could even think, my jaw was moving. As I ground the sausage with my teeth, the umami grew richer, overtaking my senses. From time to time, I’d come across the chewy hon-shimeji, and I couldn’t get enough of its texture. It was almost like a treasure hunt as I searched for the mushroom chunks. Eventually, my mouth was empty, so I reached for seconds. The seconds turned into thirds, then fourths. It was addicting.

A bright voice filtered into my ears. “YUUUM! Cheese became my favorite in a breeze!” It seemed that Kon had finally worked through the pile of vegetables and obtained his heart’s desire.

The radiant grin on his face was infectious, and all the adults started chuckling. Chopsticks were moving, beer cans were inclining, and everyone was sharing in the joy. Though we were far from finished, I could safely declare that the barbecue party was a great success.

That was when Mr. Oinu strode over to me with a lidded bamboo basket in hand. “Yo! Thanks for turnin’ my dried shrooms into works of art! The other meats and greens were gorgeous too, yeah, but nothing beats the magical combination of those good ol’ shrooms and sausages!” He held out the basket to me. “Have some! Don’t just eat sausages, try the rice balls my wife made!”

I thanked him and accepted it. I lifted the lid and was welcomed by the sight of colorful maze *gohan* onigiri arranged neatly in rows. Unlike the filling-type onigiri I made last time, maze gohan is made by mixing cooked rice with separately cooked ingredients. It's also different from *takikomi* gohan, where the ingredients are cooked together with rice. Both have their advantages and disadvantages in terms of taste and convenience, but maze gohan is often the winner in the looks department.

The onigiri selection was rich in variety, and Mrs. Oinu was very generous about the ingredients. Some were even mixed with so many vegetables and meat that they were almost falling out. My stomach was certainly famished after the unexpected second round of sausage making, and I took a large bite of the plentiful onigiri right away.

I tasted chicken, carrots, burdock roots, hijiki seaweed, and chopped abura-age. They were all seasoned to perfection, blending to create a magnificent and traditional painting of Japanese cuisine. Naturally, they went exceedingly well with rice. I could eat these forever, even without indulging in the barbecued meat and sausages. I polished off an entire onigiri in the blink of an eye and let out a satisfied sigh.

Mr. Oinu laughed merrily. "Good, right? Impressed? I wasn't kiddin' when I said that my wife's cookin' is to die for! But hey, yer food is finger-lickin' good too! And the beer and sake tonight are downright beautiful! When there's plenty of good food and booze, everyone's happy, and I'm happy just watching 'em!"

He shook his head with a wide grin. "Sheesh, ya sure have talent—a splendid and rare talent that paints the picture of joy. Cherish that talent and keep up the good work, pal."

Leaving those words, Mr. Oinu walked back to his wife while cheerfully swaying his large, bushy tail. I committed those words to memory as I admired the view in the garden. Smiles were overflowing as everyone enjoyed the barbecue. As one of the crowd, I strolled over to the crammed sausage table and went on the hunt for my next prey.

Thus began my eating session. I grilled and ate sausages. I deliberately ate

boiled sausages without grilling them to enjoy the pure flavor of the meat. At times, I ate burnt sausages of my own making, and at others I had to eat quickly to catch the runny meat juices of split sausages before they made a mess. Naturally, I also enjoyed other dishes on the menu. Meat, vegetables, onigiri... The barbecue was an absolute feast.

That was when Kon, tottering over with a plump belly, looked up at me as if he wanted to chat. I picked him up and settled him down in the folding chair nearby before sitting down and waiting patiently.

“Mikura, the sausages were amazing!” he finally said. “It’s unbelievable that I had a part in making them!”

“Yeah, they were delicious. We had to get our hands on a few tools to make them, but once we had everything, they weren’t that tough. I hear that in Europe or Central Asia, where sausages are a bigger part of the cuisine, they use even more types of meat and herbs... Maybe more delicious recipes are waiting for us to discover them.”

Kon’s eyes were bright with curiosity. “Even *more* delicious? Wow! Yeah, you’re right. There’re so many kinds of meat out there.”

I hummed in agreement. “Other than the meat we used today, mixed mince of pork and beef is also readily available in Japan, so we definitely have a lot more to explore.”

“But we can’t *pruh-zurf* them...” Kon sighed.

“Unfortunately not. Like I explained last time, I don’t want to take the risk of getting food poisoning. I suppose in Japan, the most we can do for sausages is to stock up meat in the freezer and make sausages when we want to eat them immediately. All the sausages you see in supermarkets have to be stored in the fridge. That likely means the food companies and food safety experts came to the conclusion that making commercial room-temperature sausages is difficult. If it’s a challenge for professionals, it’ll be even harder for an amateur.”

“Aw... So it’s not doable...” His shoulders slumped.

“Oh, I suppose there’s a way around it. Maybe we can make canned sausages with sausage slices. I’ve eaten canned sausages before. It won’t taste as good,

but it'll still be a preserve."

"Huuuh..." Suddenly, Kon froze like a statue. A frown knitted his eyebrows together, as if he'd forgotten something important. "Oh, right!" He cast his gaze at my house—or more specifically, the kitchen. "I totally forgot! Canned food, that's right!" He looked back at me with his usual close-eyed smile, practically radiating happiness.

"Yep, there's still the canning set. You can do more with canning than you think. Fish, meat, sausages, and, would you believe it, even bread! Well, making nice canned bread is probably out of the question for a beginner, but it should be doable at least."

"Thanks for reminding me! Canned food... Will our canned food be good? Will they be nice and spiced like our sausage bites?" He stared up blankly at the sky, likely going over all his knowledge of the topic in his mind.

"Hmm... I do have to remind you that canned food prioritizes a long shelf life. In taste, they often lose the contest to normal recipes, and sometimes they don't turn out to be tasty. I guess it depends on the care and effort you put into optimizing them. I've eaten a lot of tasty canned mackerel simmered in miso, though."

The response I got was a halfhearted "Huuuh," as if his head was in the clouds. He was probably exhausted since he'd assisted me with the sausage-making and cleanup. A full stomach also contributed to drowsiness, and I couldn't blame him for spacing out. I paid it no mind and stayed quiet so that Kon could rest undisturbed.

A while later, after lengthy consideration, Kon said, "I know! I like canned *yakitori*! And canned fruit!"

So that was what he was thinking so hard about. Grinning, I said, "Yakitori, I see. Hmm, I think we have a good chance of making tasty canned versions of that. As for fruits, I've never made them before, but I'm sure we'll find success if we work hard. The thing is, I can't guarantee it'll taste good. We won't know until we try. Let's give them a shot when we have spare time."

"Sounds good! There are so many things I wanna try! Satsuma oranges, peaches, pineapples... So many!" He grinned happily to himself.

Without warning, his petite ears suddenly perked up. All his fur stood on end, bristling like a startled cat. He lunged off the chair at top speed and darted into the house. From what I could see, his destination was the toilet.

After a brief interval, Kon returned while meticulously wiping the moisture off his paws with a mini towel he carried around with him. I saw that his stomach wasn't as round—he was back to his usual stature.

“How did he digest all that so quickly?!” I blurted out in surprise.

Kon likely didn't hear me—he headed back to the barbecue grills, possibly for another round of eating. That is, until his mother appeared. Kon instantly fled at the sight, but his mother anticipated his escape route and skillfully took a shortcut, blocking his way. She seized his torso with both hands and escorted him in my direction like a police officer taking away a criminal.

She put him down on the folding chair next to me. Kon hung his head pitifully, and his ears and tail slumped down. His mother sighed in both resignation and exasperation before she headed to one of the barbecue grills. On a hot plate, she nimbly used a pair of tongs to stir-fry a mixture of cabbage, onion, carrot, and other vegetables. Once it was cooked through, she selected a small amount of a premium cut of beef and threw it into the mix. A drizzle of barbecue sauce, and a mostly vegetable stir-fry was complete. She served it on a plate and brought it over to Kon.

“You ate too much today, young man, so this is all you can have,” she chided. “Savor the taste slowly, because you're not getting any more. If you really can't help your craving for sausages, Mommy will work hard and make some for you on another day, so let's stop here, okay?”

She moved the plate until it was right in front of his eyes. Almost instantly, Kon raised the flag of surrender at the assault of its delectable aroma and appetizing looks. Nodding, he accepted the plate and a pair of chopsticks his mother had brought. Obediently, he chewed slowly and savored the food, just like his mother said.

I could see the concentration and satisfaction on his face as he ate. The sight was simply adorable, and I couldn't help but stare. That must have given his mother the wrong message, because she made another helping and offered it

to me this time. Clearing up the misunderstanding would squander her goodwill, so I accepted with a big smile and indulged in the finishing morsel of our barbecue party.

Step by Step

MONDAY chugged along like always on the next day. I busied myself with housework and cleaning up after the barbecue party last night. Then, at the usual time and accompanied by the familiar noise of a van engine, Mr. Kaōin arrived. I'd anticipated his visit, so sweets to go with tea and floor cushions were already sitting on the veranda. I placed a kettle of water—which I'd filled beforehand—on the stove and turned on the flame before heading to the front door.

Something was different about Mr. Kaōin today—he was grinning from ear to ear as he made his way to the door. In his arms, he carried a large bag. I didn't know the proper jargon for it, but it was the type of bag you'd put your business suit in at a dry-cleaning store. *Garment bag, was it?* When he reached the entrance, he greeted me in an animated voice.

Though I was taken aback by his enthusiasm, I returned his greetings. The smile on his face grew even wider, smoothing out all the marks of time on his face as he started explaining what his package was. "This is a prototype I asked a friend of mine to make while consulting the measurements you provided. I brought it today because I would like Miss Kurikara to test whether it's a good fit. Oh, don't worry, my friend made it for fun with leftover cloth—it's nothing costly or commercial."

He held the garment bag out to me, and I accepted it. I took a moment to process what had just happened and bowed gratefully. "Thank you so much for everything you've done for us! I have some tea and sweets ready, so if you don't mind, would you like to come to the veranda? I would like to accept the bigger packages and ask more about this wonderful gift."

He nodded readily. We moved over to the veranda and transported the rest of the packages. I gave him my signature as confirmation of delivery before politely asking him to take a seat on the floor cushion. I headed back into the kitchen and mustered up all my know-how about the proper tea brewing

process. After arranging ceramic *yunomi* teacups on a tray, I returned to the veranda.

“I hope it’s to your liking,” I said as I presented the tea to him.

Mr. Kaōin accepted the teacup, and to my astonishment, he took a sip even though the tea should still be scalding. “My, what wonderful tea you have,” he said cordially.

I bowed lightly, expressing my appreciation for his compliment, though I didn’t think my tea skills were worthy of praise. I then glanced at the garment bag, which I’d left on the low table, thinking that I should leave it somewhere visible from the veranda.

“Erm...” I paused, trying to find the best wording. “I believe you mentioned it’s a prototype of some sort. Is it perhaps a prototype of the wedding dress?”

Mr. Kaōin sipped on his tea leisurely as he replied, “Yes, you could say that. I’ll be honest, it’s not as fancy as a fully-fledged dress, since it’s a handmade garment of a layperson. You would do me a great favor if Miss Kurikara tried it when she has time and gave me feedback about measurements and any issues that arise. I am certain it will be helpful for the boutique as well. Thank you in advance.”

“Handmade by a layperson, I see...” I mulled over his wording. “Apologies, but may I take a look at it right now?”

He was all smiles as he gave me a nod, and receiving his permission, I stood up. I reached for the garment bag and carefully pulled down the zipper. What I saw certainly didn’t fit the bill of “handmade” or “by a layperson.”

It was a splendid dress dyed in the color crimson, and it looked exactly like what I would expect from a clothing store. It wasn’t a shift dress—a defined waistline separated the bodice and skirt. There was an unusual and notably large zipper located in a strange spot on the skirt. Furthermore, on the top of the zipper was a section of baggy cloth surrounding a seam. Upon further inspection, the seam looked like a hole of some sort. Inside it was an elastic red cloth stitched firmly onto the underside of the skirt—*this must be a hole for the tail, and the cloth would conceal the area around the tail base*. It seemed that the tailor added such an element to prevent someone from accidentally getting

a view of the wearer's underwear from the side.

I inspected the bodice next, and I noticed that the tailor had been meticulous with the details there as well. Just below the neckline was what seemed to be a fabric rose craft, an accent item adding to the outfit's charm. No matter how I looked at it, it seemed like the work of a professional.

How many days has it been since I mentioned my plans about the wedding dress to Mr. Kaōin? I wondered in my addled mind. I had trouble fetching that information from my brain due to the chaos brewing inside, but it should only be a few days. Making something of this standard within such a short span of time sounded more like a fairy tale than reality. The tailor would require a good understanding of the fundamentals, at the very least, and a sturdy enough foundation for them to design the tail hole.

I gazed at Mr. Kaōin, questions burning in my mind.

The cheery smile was still present on his face as he said, "This isn't anything extraordinary. Beastfolk have been our neighbors since the distant past, and there have always been endeavors to make specialized clothing for them."

I hadn't voiced my questions, but Mr. Kaōin read my mind accurately. I pulled out my mild salaryman smile in return and recalled that his "friend" had been responsible for this craft. *A friend of a former minister who dreamed of a peaceful future where beastfolk and humans walk arm in arm... Would they be his supporter or a member of the parliament?*

I mean, he rose to the position of minister, so I wouldn't be surprised by either answer. Being a minister means that a significant number of people voted for him and supported his cause. He must also have influential allies. Otherwise, he would have never made it so far up the political ladder.

Until now, I had never put much thought into or actively researched the political side of the world. Though I *had* been interested in beastfolk, politics really wasn't my thing. That was the reason for my very delayed realization, and I froze while still wearing my smile mask. Silence stretched on as my mind tried to comprehend the implications in a frenzy, but I quickly realized that ordinary folk like me would only cause myself stress if I started overthinking things. Deciding that this train of thought was getting me nowhere, I pushed it to the

back of my mind.

Gently, I returned the dress to the garment bag and lowered it onto the low table. I returned to the veranda and sat down next to Mr. Kaōin. “You have my most profound gratitude for your beautiful prototype,” I said. “Miss Techī should finish her work in the evening, and I’ll ask her to try it on when she returns. I shall compile her feedback and get back to you tonight, or tomorrow at the latest.”

After all that, I highly doubted that the “rental dress” we would eventually borrow from the boutique was going to be a true rental attire. Considering the quality of the prototype, I had suspicions that the wedding dress would be a bona fide custom-made article. But it was already too late for me to change anything. I could only go with the flow and allow fate to take its course. *In that case, I will gratefully accept the kindness of Mr. Kaōin and his “friends.”*

Ever the sharp one, Mr. Kaōin seemed to read my thoughts from my expression. His wide grin softened into something more compassionate. “I shall look forward to your report in that case.” Then, with a sharp tilt of his teacup, he gulped down all his remaining tea in one go. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m afraid I have to take my leave for now.”

He stood up and left promptly.

Nothing of note happened after his visit. I did housework while tuning into the chirping of insects and the voices from the TV. After a while, I took a break and researched canned food. I returned to housework after that, and the cycle repeated itself.

Kon was stationed in the orchard today, so I could have chosen to head over. But I couldn’t bring myself to leave the dress lying haphazardly in the living room, and taking it to the orchard would be awkward as well.

In the end, I passed the time with housework and research until Techī returned in the evening. She washed her hands and came into the living room, and I welcomed her back with a warm greeting. I immediately launched into an explanation about the garment bag that was monopolizing the low table.

A soft, genuine smile lifted the corners of her lips as she picked up the garment bag. Without another word, she returned to her room.

A few minutes went by. Techii returned to the living room clad in the crimson dress, and she wore a grave expression I'd never seen on her before. "Mikura... Are you sure this is a prototype? Something of *this* quality is a *prototype*?"

The dress was a snug fit, and there wasn't a single wrinkle in the fabric that hugged her form. Her tail was also safely poking out of the skirt. The backdrop of golden dusk only emphasized the rich crimson of her dress, and accent details like the flower on her chest gave me a completely different impression when the dress was worn. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

I finally found my voice after a while. "You look beautiful in that dress. In fact, I think it's even good enough to be your wedding dress. And...yeah, I was surprised too, but he said that it's a rushed prototype."



She pinched the hem of her skirt and did a twirl. “Hmm...”

A small frown formed a crease between her eyebrows as she fell into contemplative silence. But she immediately tossed the thoughts out of her mind and smiled wide. She took out her phone and started taking pictures of herself.

Techi had never done something like that before, or at least, *I* had never been around to witness it. For the next ten or so minutes, she photographed herself until she had her fill. With a look of accomplishment on her face, she returned to her room. When she came back out, she was wearing her usual attire.

“Tell Mr. Kaōin that the measurements are perfect,” she said. “My tail felt somewhat constricted, but I suppose it’s a sacrifice I’ll have to make. Unless it’s tight enough, the cloth won’t wrap around my tail properly. Every beastperson has a different tail shape, so if they wish to target beastfolk as a whole, I would suggest they make that tail section detachable or exchangeable. They can make it a hook attachment or fasten it with buttons, for example. I’d prefer them to avoid zippers because my fur would get caught up sometimes.”

I dutifully typed down her feedback on my phone.

She started drumming her fingers on the tabletop in thought. “That aside... I have never heard of someone making prototypes for a rental dress. Does that mean they’re going to make a brand-new rental dress? I’m going to be the first one to wear it, then... It sounds more like a custom-made dress.”

I put away my phone after I finished typing. “Well... From what I could gather from Mr. Kaōin’s speech, he seems to have comrades on the other side of the border who fully support our wedding. The dress is kind of like a blessing they’re giving us. So...we probably don’t have to think too hard about it. As long as we express our gratitude properly, it should be enough.”

Techi raised an eyebrow. “I must say, it feels peculiar that complete strangers are choosing to do so, but I’ll take your word for it. In that case, I’ll accept their generosity with a grateful heart.” She paused. “On that topic, when is the pamphlet going to arrive? Based on that, we can make a lot of decisions for the dress, right? Like...the color and the style? I have nothing against red, but I feel it’s too flashy for me. There also aren’t any patterns on the cloth—it’s just a

solid color, and it doesn't sit right with me."

"Ah, good question. We didn't go into detail about the pamphlet this time, but he mentioned the pamphlet when I last called him, so...I assume it will arrive around next week? Just in case, I'll ask him when I give him your feedback." I sighed as I prepared some tea for Techī. "That's the downside of a strictly weekly postal service."

As I talked, Techī fetched some *senbei* crackers to share. We watched the news on TV and lounged in the living room.

Out of the blue, a thought occurred to me. I hesitated for a while, but I eventually found the resolve to ask Techī. "By the way, Techī, um... Could you send me a photo of you in that dress? Just one is enough! Pretty please."

"...You had plenty of time to look earlier."

"I mean, yes, kind of, but still... I suddenly wanted to see it again, I guess. It's a rare sight, so..." I couldn't meet her eyes.

Silence.

Techī's gaze went up to the ceiling, then to the garden. Letting out a small sigh, she started fiddling with her phone, sliding her fingers rapidly across the screen. I didn't know whether she was admiring the photos or trying to decide on a good one to send. She seemed to narrow down the candidates and was flicking between a set few. She kept thinking. And kept thinking. Finally, she decided on the one and sent it to me.

It took me by complete surprise, because it wasn't a photo of her in the living room, but one she'd taken in front of the mirror in her room. Unlike the selfies she had taken in the living room, the camera wasn't angled, and she wasn't posing. In it, she was standing at attention as she looked straight into the mirror. It seemed that to Techī, this was the most ordinary, inoffensive photo.

"Thank you very much," I said as sincerely as possible. "I will cherish it." I wasn't sure whether that was the right thing to say, but they were the only words that came to mind.

All emotion was wiped off Techī's face. She fell silent, still as a statue. A moment later, she harrumphed before standing up and making her way to the

bathroom. Judging by the sound, she was doing some cleaning.

I turned my gaze back to my phone screen to admire the photo thoroughly. Taking a deep breath, I shoved my phone into my pocket and went to the kitchen. Techii filled the bathtub with hot water while I added the finishing touches to our dinner. Everything was the usual after that, though there was one thing to note—ever-so-slightly, the distance between us melted away. We then retired to our respective rooms to get a good night's sleep.



THE next morning, I saw Techii off after breakfast and dove headfirst into my daily housework until a merry voice pierced the silence. “Incoming!”

It was Kon, who nimbly skipped into the house via the veranda. He dashed across the corridor, washed his hands, then raced to the kitchen, where I was doing the dishes. As was customary, he hopped onto his chair.

“Hello, Kon,” I greeted.

“Hullo!” he chirped.

I focused on the dishes once again. Meticulously, I scrubbed the tableware, rinsed them, shook off the water, then left them on the drying rack.

“Mikura, Mikura!” Kon suddenly cried. “There’s something I wanna ask you!”

“Mm? What is it?” I prompted.

“I had this question I was dying to ask you during the barbecue, but I kinda forgot because I got distracted by the food...” His big, adorable eyes glimmered with curiosity. “What’s the difference between Vienna sausages and sausages?”

Multitasking, I replied, “You said it yourself! Vienna sausages are a type of sausage, just like how a square is a type of rectangle. If you’re wondering about the different categories of sausages, there aren’t any major differences per se. We only prefer specific terms depending on how they’re made or what skin they use.”

Fun fact: sometimes the same term can refer to a different sausage in another country. The literal Japanese translation for our Vienna sausages is “*wiener*,” but I hear that in America, you think of long hot dog sausages when you hear

that name. The *wiener* we have in Japan, however, are short snack-size sausages, which is closer to the American definition of Vienna sausages.

Vienna sausages are all the rage in Japanese cooking. We eat them for breakfast, we use them in pot-au-feu, we use them in stir-fry, they're popular in kids' meals at a restaurant... I wasn't surprised that food connoisseur Kon would start wondering about them.

"Huh? Really?" He grew wide-eyed. "So, each type of sausage uses a different casing?"

"Let's start with Vienna sausages. They started off as a traditional sausage made in the Austrian city of Vienna, and that's how they got their name. Sausages with sheep intestine casings are called Vienna sausages in Japan. Frankfurter refers to sausages made with pig intestine casings, and finally, the name Bologna is assigned to sausages with cow intestine casings.

"Recently, artificial casings have been on the rise, so sometimes we don't categorize them by the type of intestine used, but instead by diameter. Sheep casings make the thinnest sausage, pig casings make medium sausages, and cow casings make the thickest. We use that rule and apply the same names to sausages with artificial casings."

"Ooooh, I see, I get it now! I've heard of *frank-footers* before! I see them all the time in convenience stores!"

"Yep. The ones you usually see are probably made with artificial casings, so they're named depending on the diameter. I mentioned this to Techii before, but using different casings has a big impact on the sausage texture, and I think it's kinda fun. Some casings are better grilled, some are better fried... There's no end to the experiments you can do with them."

"I get it if the meat inside changes the taste, but does the casing change things up *that* much?" He tilted his head quizzically and looked at me with a shred of doubt in his eyes.

During the barbecue a couple of days ago, he'd gorged on all kinds of sausages made with the same type of casing. The sausages boasted utterly dissimilar flavors due to the diverse fillings, and he'd probably gained the impression that the filling mattered most in terms of taste and texture. How

could changing the casing do anything?

In that case, a demonstration is in order. I'd prepared for this day. I'd ordered frozen, moderately fancy Vienna sausages and frankfurters online. They were simple to prepare—defrost and cook over heat. Naturally, they were inferior to homemade sausages in taste, but they saved a lot of time and effort, and sacrifices had to be made for convenience.

I took out entire bags of sausages and left them somewhere out of the way to defrost. Then, I retrieved a frying pan and a deep-fry pot. Thus began the preparation for cooking sausages.

"Explaining it verbally is probably hard for you to picture, so let's do a tasting session," I said. I could see the broad grin on Kon's face—he must have anticipated my words from my actions. "I'll cook sheep-casing Vienna sausages and pig-casing frankfurters with two methods. Let's see how different they can be!"

Receiving confirmation that a feast was indeed about to begin, Kon cheered enthusiastically. "Hurray!"

The preparations ended swiftly. We were only cooking and deep-frying sausages, after all. The only troublesome steps were preparing the deep-frying oil and cleaning it up. Not making sausages from scratch made everything a lot simpler compared to the barbecue day. Pan-crisped sausages were browned in a flash, and the fried sausages were ready in the blink of an eye.

I laid down four plates for each type of sausage. After transferring the food, I lined the plates in a row across the low table. Armed with a pair of chopsticks, we both began the tasting session. Voicing our thanks for the food, we set our sights on the pan-crisped Vienna sausages and frankfurters first.

I paused between bites and asked, "What do you think? They're quite different, right?"

In my opinion, Vienna sausages had a crispy, juicy texture when you bit into them. Meanwhile, frankfurters had a powerful savory smell and taste. Kon sampled both, but he only tilted his head quizzically, as if he couldn't sense the difference. *Hmm... They are like night and day to me, but to Kon's tastebuds and nose, they aren't distinct.*

“Oh...” I frowned slightly. “How about we try the fried ones next?”

The frying process enhanced the savory aroma of the meat, and this time, Kon noted profusely with wide eyes. He chewed, nodded, chewed, then nodded again as he alternated between the two types of sausages.

He let out a heavy exhale before exclaiming, “Wow! They’re nothing alike! I thought the thickness was what mattered, since the thicker ones have more meat and should be tastier, but I was wrong! With the fried ones, the smell and the texture are completely different!”

I nodded with satisfaction. “Right? Due to this difference, we often prefer to use unique seasoning for each type, because there is no one-size-fits-all option.”

As I talked, I fetched some ketchup and squeezed a modest amount onto the fried sausages. The fact that sausages go well with ketchup is common knowledge, and ketchup with fried Vienna sausages is a good combination. However, fried frankfurters are several steps above that—the strong aroma and ketchup get on like a house on fire, making them reign supreme above boiled and pan-crisped frankfurters. A single bite was like stepping into a whole new world.

Of course, part of the divine taste was due to the high price tag on the sausages I’d selected, but either way, this is my favorite way of eating frankfurters.

Kon seemed to share my appreciation of the delicacy as well. “Yuuuum! How can this be so *good?!?*”

It was an alluring and dangerous combination—once you started eating, it was hard to stop. By the time you come to your senses, the number of calories you ingested would be frightening to think of. We were spellbound, and we almost forgot that our initial plan was a tasting session.

We polished off all the food, rested a little while to digest, then started tidying up. Kon was giving me a hand when he paused in front of a cupboard in one corner of the kitchen. He’d opened the door and was staring intently at the contents. “Hey, Mikura! The cupboard is full of canned stuff! When did you buy these?”

“Hm? Oh, that. I’ve been buying some canned food here and there whenever I go to the supermarket or do online shopping.”

“Huuuh? You keep stocking up on them? But you have *plenty*... Actually, you’ve got loads! I mean, you filled a whole shelf inside here!” He gestured.

“Uh, I guess.” I scratched my cheek sheepishly. “I like having a diverse selection available.”

With a faint thud, he shut the door. Incredulous and surprised, he turned to look at me. “Wait, why are you buying so much? Are you studying for when you make your own canned food?”

Smiling, I addressed his question. “That’s part of it, yes, but I’m mainly stockpiling food. That might look like a lot, but Tech and I can finish them faster than you can imagine. I like having variety so that it doesn’t get dull, and having a balanced diet is healthier.”

“Stockpile? Why? Do you eat lots of canned food? But you’re so good at cooking! You won’t need so many.”

“Ah, I see why you’re confused. I’m not collecting them for everyday use, I’m amassing them as an emergency food supply during natural disasters. You can’t go out to shop when there’s a natural disaster, and it usually takes a week or two until things get back to normal. I have the canned food ready so that I won’t go hungry during the wait.”

I continued, “I don’t just stockpile canned food—I’ve also bought bottled water with long shelf lives and stored them in the warehouse. The list goes on: toilet paper; tissue paper; bags I can use to do the laundry by pouring in water and detergent; powder coagulant that can solidify and deodorize waste when the toilet won’t flush... I have such items ready and tucked away in different areas at home.”

“Huuuh! Oh yeah, I remember I once saw on TV that everyone should have an emergency stockpile just in case!”

“Right, I see such messages from time to time too.” I nodded. “If everyone prepares emergency food and daily necessities, we won’t be caught off guard when or if disaster strikes. That means disaster relief won’t have to transport

supplies such as food from the outside world. They can prioritize hospital supplies and materials needed to restore infrastructure, and as a result, the settlement will recover faster. That's the theory, at least."

"I see, I see!" Kon paused. "Hey, what if disaster doesn't happen, then? If you buy so much, they'll go bad!"

"It's fine if you keep track of the expiration dates and eat them before that happens. And to be honest, that's the best outcome for emergency supplies—never needing to use them. Only the fortunate are able to think: 'Ah, all my preparation went to waste.'"

Kon frowned and tilted his head. He fell silent, occasionally uttering incoherent noises as he mulled over my words. He wasn't able to fully comprehend what I meant and was summoning every last drop of intellect in his brain. As a child, the concept of disaster was somewhat foreign to him.

"Disasters arrive unannounced and ruin people's lives," I explained. "Your mundane, everyday life suddenly vanishes. What you thought was normal—what you took for granted—is turned upside down. I've only experienced something of a disaster level once in my life, when I was a child. I was very lucky, because I didn't suffer any hardship thanks to my great-grandfather. That's why I can't call myself a true survivor or victim of a disaster, but what I saw will never fade from my memory. I always make sure to be thoroughly prepared for an emergency."

It seemed that some of what I wanted to convey had gotten across. With a grim look on his face, Kon nodded solemnly. He reached for his large pocket—located around the stomach area of his clothes—and surprise, surprise, he took out a kids' phone.

Clearly, it was a recent purchase. Recently, Kon started preferring denim overalls or hoodies—clothing with large pockets. It seemed that he'd chosen such clothing so that he could carry his phone around everywhere.

Looking proud, he presented his phone to me before tapping on it, as if to declare, "I know how to use this! I'm a big boy that can handle my own phone!" He opened his contacts list and firmly tapped on one name.

The person on the other side answered the call immediately and said,

“Hello?”

Kon brought the phone to his ear and nervously began his exchange with the other party. “Mommy! ...Huh? Why are you asking who I am? Shouldn’t you know me? Oh, right, I should give my name first when I call someone. It’s me! Me! ...No, this isn’t a scam call! Um, uh, this is Konshironushi Sanmaya speaking. Huh? Oh, I’m calling because, um... Right! I wanted to ask whether we have emergency supplies at home! I learned that we need to prepare for disasters! ... What? We have? But I never knew... Hardtack? Yeah, I remember eating that a while ago. It was nice with jam... Oh, that was emergency food?!”

Konshironushi Sanmaya was Kon’s full name. I didn’t know its origin or meaning, but it sounded imposing, and I had a feeling there was a grand story behind it. Most people referred to him as Kon outside of formal occasions though, because it was quite a mouthful. Tech, his coworkers, and even the Sanmaya parents usually preferred his simple nickname.

Judging by his reaction, this was his first-ever phone call, and the Sanmaya household was indeed prepared for the unexpected. They had a respectable stockpile and were adapting the “rolling stock” strategy to prevent the supply from going stagnant.

Unlike traditional stockpiling, where you buy in bulk in one go and consume the emergency food near the expiration date, rolling stock involves incorporating emergency food and necessities into your daily life. You would eat the oldest batch of food regularly and replace it with new stock, almost like flowing water. But it doesn’t just apply to food. Wet wipes, gas canisters, batteries, and even hand warmers come in handy in daily life and during an emergency.

This was the practice that the Sanmaya family adopted, and it seemed that Kon had recently snacked on emergency food that was close to the expiration date. It was so well integrated into their lives, in fact, that Kon had never questioned it or thought of it as special. Hardtack is a staple emergency ration, but Kon had assumed they were ordinary snacks. Though he looked as if his world had been turned upside down, he listened obediently to his mother’s explanation on the other end of the line and made noises of understanding from time to time to indicate that he was paying attention.

A few minutes later, the call ended. He fiddled with his phone once again, tapping hard on the screen. Finally, he looked at me with a radiant smile and chirped happily, “Mikura! My house has a proper stockpile too! We have portable emergency kits for everyone in the family, lots and lots of food, so Mommy said we’re fine no matter what happens!”

He puffed out his chest in pride. “We chipmunk beastfolk love and are good at stocking up according to Mommy! Heehee, how about that? We’re awesome, right?”

I only had one heartfelt comment for him. “You guys are amazing!” I walked over to him and ruffled his head profusely, overwhelmed by his cuteness.



AFTER Techi came back that evening, we had dinner and took our respective baths. During the lounging time afterward, I talked about my conversation with Kon during the day.

“So yeah, we ended up on the topic of food stockpiling. Actually, Techi, is there anything you’d like to add to our stash?”

Techi made a noncommittal noise and pondered for a moment. “Chipmunks *do* have the habit of stockpiling, and many chipmunk beastfolk share the same trait. Many beastfolk love hoarding or collecting. But allow me to remind you that the animal chipmunks aren’t that simple. Chipmunks are also seed-dispersing animals that leave fresh forests in their wake, and if I have to choose, I’m probably more inclined toward that.”

I blinked in surprise. “Seed dispersing? I don’t mean anything by this, but that isn’t my impression of chipmunks.”

Techi picked up a spare floor cushion and rolled it into a makeshift pillow. She laid down, leaned her elbow on it, and with cat-like elegance, she propped up her chin with her palm. “Surely you must have heard some old wives’ tales about chipmunks and seeds. They’re animals that bury their food stash underground, and this food stash includes seeds and nuts. Sometimes, they forget about the stashes, which germinate into new trees, expanding the forest area.”

“Ahhh... You’re right, I think I’ve heard such stories once or twice on TV. But does that really make them seed dispersers?”

She flicked her tail casually. “Of course. Remember that these tales are told from the human perspective. Did those chipmunks really forget where their stashes were? What if the chipmunks are doing it deliberately to expand the forest, which serves as their habitat? I wouldn’t be surprised if the chipmunks are intelligent enough to know that on an instinctive level.”

“Oh, you make a good point. That’s an interesting perspective. The instincts or survival strategy of chipmunks lead them to protect their habitat, which is how their species managed to withstand the test of time. In that case, I agree, they would be seed dispersers.” I paused. “The chipmunk beastfolk I know, you and the kids, all love taking care of the chestnut and walnut trees... Maybe you’re satisfying those instincts by maintaining the orchard?”

“Who knows?” she shrugged. “Like how humans have forgotten a lot of your natural instincts, so have we beastfolk. Do we chipmunk beastfolk like stockpiling, collecting, and taking care of trees because of our instincts? Or is it because that’s the depiction of chipmunks in the media, which affected us subconsciously? Needless to say, some chipmunk beastfolk despise hoarding. Is that because we have grown numb to our natural instincts, or is it because it’s a simple matter of personal preference? It’s almost impossible to find objective evidence for either side, so perhaps it will forever be an unsolved mystery.”

“Mm. It’s totally possible that the media has affected the beastfolk’s image of yourselves.” I paused before switching to a lighter tone. “No matter which it is, though, I’m grateful. Though we took a long-winded route there, we were reunited because you ended up working in our orchard. This instinct or subconscious is what brought us together, and it’s also the reason I’m lucky enough to have you by my side. To me, that’s more than enough.”

My current life wouldn’t be possible if the chipmunk beastfolk never chose to take care of Gramps’s orchard. Techii wouldn’t be here today, sharing a peaceful, blissful snapshot of life with me. I wouldn’t have found this special someone with whom I wanted to nurture a family, a *home*. *I am a happy man, and isn’t that all that matters?*

With that conclusion in mind, I let out a deep exhale and took a sip of my tea.

“Ahem!” Techī cleared her throat loudly. I didn’t know whether it was her way of hiding her embarrassment or something else, but she continued in a somewhat forceful tone, “I think we got off-topic! Let’s suppose that I do like hoarding and want to start a stash of some sort. Why did you want to ask me that question? What for?”

“Huh? Oh, um, well... Nothing special, really. I mean, I like stockpiling, so I thought maybe we could discuss our shared hobby if you like it too. Also, I think I told you this before, but my long-term goal is to fill the warehouse to the brim with preserves.

“But such a goal is expensive.” I looked into her eyes earnestly. “We’re going to get married, and as life partners, I thought that it’s important to communicate and discuss such matters with you. I wanted to know what you think about such a costly hobby before I truly dive into it. I want there to be negotiations so that we can reach a mutual agreement, because marriage means it’s always a matter of ‘we’ and not ‘me.’”

She nodded. “I see. You can rest easy, then. I have no objections to any of your hobbies, Mikura. If I did, I would have asked you to turn off the gigantic fridge in the warehouse long ago. An appliance of that size requires a monstrous amount of electricity to function. It adds a substantial amount to our monthly power bill, and the total costs over an entire year are nothing to laugh at.”

Then, she shrugged with an exasperated smile. “But as someone who’s known Tomiyasu for years, I suppose I got used to it. Knowing that you’re his descendant, I’ve long braced myself for you to take after him in that respect.”

Techī had worked under Gramps ever since she was a child and well into her adulthood. Though I was Gramps’s blood relative, she had spent much more time with him than me. That meant she had been exposed to his hobbies for over a decade—she had watched over his obsession almost like his own child, and she knew exactly what the price entailed. She likely had a lot more opinions about the matter than she was giving off, but none of it seemed to involve loathing.

But...knowing someone for a long time means that you're less tolerant about certain decisions, because you care. I cast my eyes down at the thought. There were topics we both had to put our foot down on *because* we were getting married, since our decisions would affect each other's lives.

However, if she truly had adverse feelings about my stance on my hobby, I doubted that she would've ever considered the possibility of marriage. My initial marriage proposal had been more of an accident than intentional, and we'd ended up getting engaged because the course of events pushed us forward at lightning speed. But both of us had plenty of time to back out, to say, "No, this isn't what I want."

We'd already met each other's parents and were living together under the same roof. It went without saying that, at this point, both of us had hardened our resolve to walk hand in hand for the rest of our lives. Asking her such an overdue question was a tad silly of me.

A burst of emotion welled up in my chest. It was overwhelming, and my mouth obeyed the thrumming of my heart before I could think. "Techi, I can't imagine my life without you in it. I want to guard our simple but precious happiness together, even after our hair turns gray. Will you marry me?"

It was my second proposal. A proposal with the proper respect and sincerity that Techi deserved.

A shade of cherry red bloomed on her face, and her eyes grew wide. She gritted her teeth, and for some reason, she glared daggers at me before standing up. She sat back down on her knees in a formal *seiza*, straightened her back, and looked right into my eyes.

Her reply was short, but it was an answer every person in my position dreamed of. "Yes."

I felt the corners of my lips rise uncontrollably. The flush on her cheeks grew a shade deeper, and she started trembling, perhaps out of embarrassment. She grabbed the floor cushion she'd used as a pillow and hurled it at me with all her might.



THE next morning started off with a pleasant breakfast with Techī. Perhaps due to my second proposal last night—though it was the first from my perspective—Techī assumed a more tender attitude than usual. I saw her off, a habit that had woven itself into my daily routine, before I did the housework until noon.

When noon approached, I started brainstorming about our lunch menu for the day. But before I could narrow it down to one plan, I heard the abrupt, hurried footsteps of Techī and Kon. I glanced at the time—it was earlier than their usual lunch break.

“What’s the occasion today?” I wondered out loud. Their footsteps were usually steadier, and they almost never came home before lunchtime.

Techī finally appeared in the living room, her face slick with sweat and her hair an unkempt mess. Kon wasn’t in better shape—his clothes and fur were muddier than usual, and he looked as if a tornado had given him a makeover. Not pausing to give me an explanation, they rushed right into the bathroom.

Something major must have happened, but I was completely clueless.

Oh well, I’m sure they would’ve told me first thing if it were an emergency. They wouldn’t have rushed to take a leisurely bath. The only way I could help was to prepare body towels and a filling lunch menu to help them fuel up after the sprinting. I nodded to myself and proceeded to deliver two bath towels to the changing area.

Techī heard my approach, and she yelled out from the bathroom, “I want meat!”

“On it,” I replied. I returned to the kitchen and resumed my menu brainstorming.

I’d initially considered something nutritious and light on the stomach, like silky *somen* noodles paired with my special homemade *mentsuyu* soup base. Plenty of condiments and vegetables would be thrown into the mix, making it a satisfying meal. However, that plan went out the window after hearing Techī’s request. *Meat, huh...?*

“Ah, how about cold soba noodles with meat? Let’s go with that,” I decided.

There was no time to waste. I got busy right away.

With noodles, I usually make the soup base first, because noodles might get sticky or dry after a period of time. Start by thinly slicing spring onions. Finely chop mizuna and celery. These three are all common condiments in Japanese cuisine, especially mizuna, which is crunchy and has a mild peppery taste.

Next, make the tsuyu, the soup base or sauce. Combine soy sauce, mirin, dashi, and cooking sake in a pot. Bring the liquid to boil. In the case of tsuyu, making extra doesn't hurt.

For our dear customer Techii, prepare a generous amount of pork. Sauté lightly before adding the tsuyu. Simmer until all liquid evaporates.

Cook soba according to package instructions and chill in cold water. Drain and arrange soba on soup plates. Sprinkle on sesame seeds and sliced spring onions. Toss the noodles until the condiments are evenly spread. Top the noodles with a heap of pork, mizuna, and celery. Drizzle with chili oil for the final touch.

I had some chilled tsuyu stored in the fridge, and I would pour that on moments before the dish was served. During the scorching days of summer, I like to add some vinegar or ponzu sauce to give the tsuyu a sour touch, making it more refreshing. The crisp aroma of yuzu citrus in ponzu sauce is especially welcome in the sweltering heat. Some prefer to squeeze fresh citrus juice into their tsuyu. As for toppings, we are spoiled for choice in terms of the vegetables we can pair with the meat.

The freedom we have with meat soba is one of its charms. It's also quick and simple, but still surprisingly delicious. Frankly, it's one of my favorite recipes. Granted, I have a lot of those.

Once I finished arranging the noodles on the plates, I transferred them onto the low table. While I was at it, I headed to the fridge to fetch some chilled barley tea and poured some for all three of us.

This was when Kon and Techii came into the living room, squeaky clean and in fresh clothes. They plopped down onto their seats eagerly and immediately started chugging down the barley tea. Their eyes were wide with focus as they stared unblinkingly at the pork soba. The sight was almost eerie, and they looked like starved predators stalking their prey.

Um, okay, maybe I'll ask them about what happened later, I thought, with more than a small amount of nervousness. Instead, I said, "Pour on some tsuyu before you eat. There isn't a standard amount or anything, so adjust to your liking."

I sat down, and together, we voiced our thanks for the food. Picking up my chopsticks, I dug into the vegetables and the pork, then slurped up the aromatic soba noodles. The scene at the low table would probably seem comical to a bystander. I was enjoying my food at a leisurely pace while my two companions looked as if someone had pressed the fast-forward button. Their plates were empty in a flash. They let out satisfied sighs and calm finally returned to their faces.

Hesitantly, I asked, "What in the world happened? I could hardly recognize you two when you ran in so fiercely."

Techi gulped down some barley tea. "Pests happened. Not one, not two, not a hundred, and not even a thousand. *Way* more than that—an outbreak. Chestnut trees are robust enough to withstand the assault of pests, but that number was astronomical. We couldn't just let them have their way, so the kids and I went around exterminating them. As if the numbers weren't bad enough, those pesky things even move quickly and fly all over the place..." She sighed. "It's been years since the last time we were so overwhelmed."

I frowned. I was struggling to pinpoint the type of insect they were referring to. "May I ask what kind of pests they were? They're fast, can fly, and number in the thousands at least... Longhorn beetles, perhaps?"

Techi answered with a shake of her head. "No, great chestnut aphids."

"Aphids..." I searched my memory for the term. "Those are small and numerous insects that ladybugs like to feed on, right?"

"As you can infer from the name 'great,' these aphids are much larger than the ones you're likely picturing. To make things worse, the great chestnut aphids in this forest are apparently particularly large compared to specimens from other areas. I've heard that ladybugs are natural predators of aphids in other regions, but not the ones in the Wilds. They don't even stand a chance—the aphids would smash them into a pancake before they could do anything."

“Sm-Smash them?!” I exclaimed. *Even though they’re supposed to be their natural predators?!*

I shuddered. I couldn’t even imagine what these aphids on steroids looked like. That was when Kon used his two hands to indicate a circle around a size he could hold in his arms. A rough estimate with my eyes told me that the bugs were around eight to twelve inches in diameter. *A swarm of thousands of aphids that size? Seriously?*

I’d known that the Wilds were extraordinary due to the influence of the Fusang trees, but nothing had prepared me for the knowledge of such creatures. I failed to suppress a shiver at the ghastly scene my mind was picturing. “Sh-Sheesh. You guys must be exhausted. Thank you for your hard work.”

Techi and Kon didn’t offer any more words. Instead, they held out their once-full soup plates to me. I could almost hear their silent message, “Seconds please.”

I swiftly polished off the remainder of my soba before accepting their plates. Immediately, I prepared a second helping of pork soba for our heroes who had returned valiantly from a hard-fought battle.

I made a few adjustments to the second helping so that it wouldn’t get repetitive—this time, I added tomatoes. The sweet-and-sour taste would be a nice change. There were also slight tweaks to the tsuyu ingredients. Lastly, I sprinkled on chopped wakame seaweed.

The resulting soba was a big success. Pork Soba Version 2.0 disappeared swiftly into their stomachs. They had almost finished simultaneously, and they let out contented sighs.

I smiled as I watched them enjoy their tea. “You two sure have a healthy appetite. I know that you’re exhausted after the tug-of-war against giant, pesky insects and all, but that speed was incredible.” I hesitated. “I don’t mean to offend you or anything, but Tech, are you sure you can eat like this? Won’t you put on weight? It’d be awkward if you couldn’t fit the custom-made dress when it arrives.”

Identical expressions of bewilderment flashed across both their faces.

Strangely enough, Kon was the first to react, his eyes growing wide as he gasped.

Techi said, “Oh, right.” Nodding to herself, she held up her yunomi teacup with one hand and replied, “I haven’t had the chance to explain to you yet, Mikura, but beastfolk won’t gain weight from a portion like this. For you see, our physical capabilities exceed humans by far. Because of that, our metabolism is proportionally higher, which means that we burn more calories during rest and activity.

“To put it in layman’s terms, let’s take the bearfolk who came to eat the smoked meat last time as an example. They boast strength and stamina that rival actual bears. I’m sure you can imagine what would happen if they ate the same amount as a standard human. They would lose weight in no time and starve to death if they continued the diet.”

She continued, “Even humans have to eat more if they exercise a lot, or else they’ll eventually face the same fate, right? That’s why most beastfolk have a ravenous appetite. That’s especially the case for kids like Kon, who are growing every day. Our necessary calorie intake is much, much higher than a normal human.”

After the lengthy explanation, Techi downed the rest of the tea in her cup. As I watched, I let out a lame “Oh...” After living so long with her, I’d completely forgotten that the structures of our bodies—of beastfolk and humans—were nothing alike. Our physical prowess couldn’t even be compared, and it was only natural that she required substantial calorie intake to balance that out.

Ancient Japanese people are famous for their short statures, and I once heard that the cause wasn’t a lack of specific nutrients for growth, but a simple insufficiency of calories. Just like Techi had implied, if laborers or professional athletes didn’t replenish enough energy during their meals, their bodies would give out before long. That applied to beastfolk.

“Wait...” I frowned, realizing something long overdue. “Does that mean all the food I’ve made until now were far from enough for you two?”

Techi and Kon traded awkward grins, as if to say, “Oops, he figured that out.” Then, they both fished out long and narrow wrappers from their pockets.

I recognized them on sight. “Hey, those are chocolate bars! And they’re even the high-calorie type with nuts! That reminds me, I’ve seen you two snacking on them from time to time. Don’t tell me... Do you two gobble up piles of those every day to make up for the lack of calories?”

Hearing that, Techii went over to her shoulder bag in the corner of the living room and took out dozens of chocolate bars. Kon followed her example and reached for his backpack, which contained the tools he needed for his job in the orchard. He revealed roughly the same number of chocolate bars and presented them to me.

Recently, low-calorie chocolate bars have started appearing in shops, but most chocolate bars with nuts and almonds are still high in energy. At the same time, they are light and portable, so hikers and soldiers prize them as delicious and nutritious rations.

That means both of them went out of their way to carry these around so that they wouldn’t starve... Oh, I’m horrible, my ignorance is what forced them to be in such a tough spot! Guilt weighed heavily on my heart. But then, it hit me. *Wait. Hold on a minute. They could’ve just told me earlier that they aren’t meeting their daily calorie intake. I can just make more food, it’s not much trouble. Why did they keep quiet about it until today? I’ve been cooking for them for ages...*

Don’t tell me... I narrowed my eyes in suspicion. “Say, Techii, Kon. Do you both love chocolate? Are you possibly using the low-calorie meals I serve as an excuse to gorge yourself on all the chocolate you want, hm? Let me guess... You two have secret stashes of chocolate snacks other than these chocolate bars, and are eating them at every opportunity, aren’t you?”

“That’s right, Detective Mikura!” they said in unison and cackled loudly.

Finally, they told me the whole story between laughter.

It had started off as a gesture of consideration. They didn’t want to cause me extra trouble while I was still adapting to life in the Wilds, and had been planning on bringing up the matter when they found a good opportunity. But being able to eat their favorite chocolates whenever they want, however many they want, was an addicting lifestyle. After the intruder incident, they both

obtained a lump sum of money, which meant that they had even less inhibition about guzzling these sugary snacks.

Eventually, one day turned into two, two days turned into three, and three days turned into eternity. They both conspired to maintain their sweet and chocolatey lives until the day of my discovery.

Covering my forehead with my palm, I said, “I mean, I’m to blame too. I should have noticed after all the signs, like your hearty appetite and Kon’s binge eating during the barbecue, so I don’t have the right or intention of reproaching either of you. But I still think you should’ve told me earlier!” I pursed my lips.

They only laughed harder after hearing my response. *Seriously, what am I going to do with these two?* I dragged out a lengthy sigh. Since I was now aware of the problem, I should start planning right away. I took out my phone, downloaded a calorie counter app, and launched it. I fiddled with the numbers so that the calorie intake goal was several times that of an average adult male.

As I browsed the app and started brainstorming about meal plans, I said, “Either way, I’ll make sure that your meals from now on will be higher in calories. Binge-eating chocolate for an extended period isn’t good for your health. I’m not saying that you mustn’t eat any, but could you tone it down a bit from now on, please?”

Surprisingly, they agreed easily.

“As you wish,” Techii said.

“Okaaaay!” Kon chirped.

Both of them looked like kids who had gotten away with mischief as they shared an impish grin.

Oh, it’s on, I thought, taking it as a challenge. In my mind, I made a mental note to scheme a good prank and get back at them.



IF one wanted to do the opposite of a diet and instead consume calories efficiently, energy density is an important value to consider. It’s a measure of calories in a given weight of food, and oil topped the charts. It is followed, in

order, by meat fat, butter, chocolate, nuts, cheese, and so on. Legumes rank relatively high, and so do red meat and bread. But once you get past these, the rest of the food drops dramatically in calorie density. In order from highest to lowest, there is fish, rice, corn, potatoes, fruits, then leafy vegetables.

Consuming low-calorie density food doesn't mean you won't gain weight, however. Like I mentioned, calorie density is a measure of average calories per weight, not the total calories you're consuming. If the ingredient is light, like bread, the calorie density naturally shoots up. A heavy ingredient, on the other hand, tends to have a lower calorie density.

So what is this measure useful for, then? Well, these numbers are regarded as important when you're traveling, going on an adventure, hiking, or sailing. Chocolate bars with nuts are one good example—they're light but dense in calories *and* are delicious on top of being functional. Weight is extremely important when you're on the road. Food with high water content dramatically increases weight, so for convenience, most rations are dried, and they also last longer. These factors likely caused dried foods to saturate the category of traditional trail foods.

I was researching such matters during the period of respite after lunch. While Techii and Kon were sprawled on the tatami mats and using floor cushions as pillows, I swiped away on my phone. "This is interesting information, but it's not that helpful for me," I muttered to myself. "I thought trail foods might give me inspiration since chocolate counts as one, but I'm not having any luck."

That was when Kon rolled across the tatami like a bowling ball until he reached me. He used my body as a crutch to stand up and peered at the screen. "Huuuh... Calorie *dense-tea*... Oil, butter, chocolate, nuts... Oooh, I love chocolate and nuts!"

I nodded back with a small smile. "Same here. But unfortunately, eating them as a staple food isn't the best idea. I use oil and butter during cooking, yes, but too much will sully the taste, and that'll likely have other bad effects on your body. A healthy, balanced diet is important. Which means that in the end, doubling or tripling the amount I make is still the most sensible option, but..." I sighed. "At the same time, eating too much is a burden on your digestive system."

Stroking my chin in thought, I muttered, “I suppose I could add a small platter of mixed nuts during every meal, or sprinkle crushed nuts onto your rice?” I fell silent for a while, thinking. “Well, changing your eating habits dramatically isn’t good for your body either, so let’s increase the portion of your meals bit by bit and adjust things as we go. As for the chocolate bars, you two can eat some whenever you need a boost. I suppose our long-term goal is to eventually arrive at a meal plan where you don’t need supplements.”

“Mm-hmm,” Kon hummed noncommittally. He seemed to have gotten bored with resting, and he started using my body as a climbing post. He used my elbow as a foothold and my shoulder as a handhold to propel himself onto my shoulder. He swung one leg onto my other shoulder, hitching a ride and resting his fluffy chin on my head. I could feel him shaking slightly from left to right—he was likely swaying his tail.

Though Kon ate plenty and exercised plenty, his body was surprisingly light. He wasn’t as light as a feather or anything, but he was certainly lighter than a human child. I straightened my back to give him better support and felt his weight press down on me. With a new passenger onboard, I scoured through various recipe websites for inspiration.



“Interesting, they have freeze-dried cheese overseas, huh? Taste aside, since it’s dehydrated, it has a high-calorie density. Noted. Whoa, butter tea is a thing, too? I see, I see... Hm, what about trail foods in Japan? ...That’s unfortunate. Doesn’t seem like our food culture places importance on calorie efficiency.”

I heard Kon’s voice from above my head. “Mikura, Mikura! What kinda trail food do we have in Japan? Other than umeboshi!”

“Hmm...” I gave it some thought before replying, “I suppose *hoshii*, a type of dried rice, is pretty famous. You spread boiled rice until it’s a sheet and allow it to dry. It’s similar to the instant rice we’re familiar with, but it’s dried with a different method. You can either eat *hoshii* as is or use hot water to rehydrate it first. Other than that, I guess *hoshiimo*, dried sweet potatoes, count too. Ah, *imogara nawa*, taro stem ropes, are famous for their creativity.”

“Huuuh... What are taro stem ropes?”

“Well, you braid taro stems into long ropes, simmer them in miso broth, then dry them. They’re like actual ropes, which makes them easy to carry around. Samurai wrapped them like belts around their waists or used them as ropes to tie down baggage. Whenever they wanted to eat some, they would tear some off, chop them, then toss them into boiled water. The resulting soup is a makeshift replacement for miso soup.”

Kon winced. “Mikura... Is that really edible? I don’t wanna eat it...”

“I’ll be honest, I don’t want to eat any either. I guess if you boil them over high heat, you can sterilize them, but I think they’re more of a relic of the past, back when hygiene wasn’t a part of the food culture. The makers sacrificed hygiene for lightness and convenience. In terms of calories, they’re not that high in energy because vegetables and miso paste are the key ingredients, but they’re definitely a good source of salt.

“Other than *imogara nawa*, another popular field ration was the *hyōrōgan*, food pills, which doesn’t preserve as long but offers a balanced intake of nutrients. You mix a multitude of ingredients and roll them into spheres. They’re famous as ninja rations.”

The moment the word “ninja” left my mouth, I felt Kon twitch and stiffen.

Techi was supposed to be sleeping, but her ears and tail abruptly stood at attention. She turned to me, and curiosity was burning in her eyes.

I blinked in surprise. “Oh, do you guys like ninjas or something?”

They both nodded profusely—I could feel my head swaying with Kon’s movement. Kon exclaimed, “I saw them on TV! Ninjas are sooo cool!”

Techi leaned forward. “To us beastfolk, ninjas are almost like an element of foreign culture we can only see on TV and in movies! They are all the rage around here. I hear that when a special ninja feature airs, the overnight rating numbers around this area skyrocket!

“We would love to visit museums where ninja documents are stored and participate in ninja hands-on experience tours, but we can’t leave this forest.” She sighed. “Other than ninjas, documentaries about Hokkaido and Okinawa are popular too. Oh, and features on the hot spring spots scattered across Japan. We have hot springs in the Wilds, so we can satisfy our craving to a certain extent, but it doesn’t quell our curiosity about other types of spring water.”

Passion was seeping through their voices, resounding loud and clear. I’d never truly understood that being unable to leave the forest was a heartless lock that robbed them of the opportunity to see the big wide world. My eyes were stinging, and I chewed on my lip.

An idea struck me, and I was speaking faster than I could think. “Then...do you guys want to experience the ninja life by making authentic food pills? They don’t last very long, but they’re still technically preserves. If we make food pills with high calories, you can eat them alongside rice and solve your calorie intake problem too... Oh, and let’s make canned food! We’ve been planning that for a while, and making canned food with high calories isn’t that much of a challenge.”

“You’re the best!” A loud, cheerful voice rained down from above. I could feel the vigorous shaking of Kon’s tail—he was over the moon.

Techi, meanwhile, was beaming at me like a carefree child. Her eyes were filled with joy and anticipation, and my heart melted at the sight.

So You Want to be a Ninja?

FOOD pills don't call for a complicated recipe.

First, combine a list of flour. The more types of flour present, the better. Examples include rice flour, buckwheat flour, millet flour, kudzu starch, and so on. Add the following: water; something sweet like sugar or honey; sake; sesame seeds and perilla seeds; nuts such as pine nuts; umeboshi; and traditional Chinese medicine such as licorice or cinnamon bark. Knead the mixture and roll it into spheres. Done.

You can eat them as-is, or dry them, roast them, steam them, dissolve them in water... They aren't picky.

Now, as for how they taste, it's a good question. It depends on the recipe and the chef's skills. Different regions and different historical ninja clans all had their own variations of the recipe. Unfortunately, there aren't many surviving records about the exact amounts of each ingredient, and the steps in the recipes available are also extremely crude.

Because of that, slackers who don't invest much effort into exploring a better taste would naturally make pills that deserve a place in horror stories. On the other hand, good cooks who adjust the proportions and taste as they go would make delicious food pills. You reap what you sow.

To tell you the truth, when I was a child, I loved the ninjas in an anime I used to watch. That inspired me to make food pills with my mother's help, and she was a good cook. Laced with a hint of sweetness and the aroma of nuts, all the food pills we'd made were to die for. They were reminiscent of *wagashi*—traditional Japanese confectionery—or sticky mochi with their chewy texture. If I put my mind to it, I was willing to bet that I could find Japanese confectionery with a similar taste in a wagashi store somewhere.

Under the category of food pills, there is a pill called the thirst-quenching pill, and umeboshi is the key ingredient. The sour taste would cause the consumer

to produce more saliva, temporarily quenching their thirst when there was no water available. Back then, I'd dissolved some in water and had been pleasantly surprised by the taste. It reminded me of Japanese plum and kelp tea.

There are even anecdotes of ninjas who, against their better judgment, eat the delicious sweet-and-savory food pills at the start of their missions. Later on, they ended up running low on food. Therefore, the historical food pills shouldn't be unpalatable. Perhaps the nutritious and delicious food pills were a source of motivation for ninjas who had tough missions ahead of them.

As you can see, food pills place an emphasis on taste, nutrition, and convenience over preservation. They won't go bad immediately, but they don't last too long, either. Another orthodox trail food in Japan is the famous onigiri, which is also found lacking in the preservation department in exchange for the same properties. This is just my personal opinion, but Japanese citizens' famous obsession with food and taste must have already started around the time such food became popular.

Back to the homemade food pills I was planning to make, I should probably avoid using Chinese medicine. I hear that licorice has a strong influence on internal organs, and I can't afford to mess up. One should never mess with medicine unless they have the proper knowledge.

Such thoughts churned in my mind as I researched food pill recipes on the Internet. Time was ticking away, and it should be the end of lunch break very soon.

Out of the blue, Techii let out an "Oh, right."

I and the passenger on my shoulders both turned to stare at her.

She was gazing at the prayer alcove as she added, "It completely slipped my mind, but Fusang seeds pack a lot of calories. They're remarkably high in calories and protein from what I remember. Apparently, one seed will provide you with enough energy to survive between several weeks and a month without eating."

She was still staring at the prayer alcove after dropping that proverbial bombshell on me. To be more specific, her attention was on the *takatsuki*, a Japanese Buddhist altar fitting that served as a tall offering stand. The Fusang

seed I'd received from Mr. Karashina a while ago was enshrined on it.

I stood up slowly with Kon on my shoulders and walked closer so that I could get a better look.

I should have realized earlier. Though I didn't know how big the Fusang saplings were, they should be bigger than normal saplings. The seeds for trees of that size must contain an incredible amount of nutrients. Eating such a seed, therefore, would be no different from eating a condensed ball of energy. An entire month sounded like an exaggeration, but it might be enough for three or four days.

Finally close enough to see the altar, I leaned forward to inspect the offering. But...

"Huh?!" Kon and I gasped simultaneously.

The cause of our shock was the walnut-like Fusang seed. When I'd cleaned the Buddhist altar this morning, I could've sworn it'd been perfectly normal. But now, a vivacious sprout poked out of the seam between the hemispheres, and two emerald leaves stood tall and proud.

No way! It doesn't have soil or water, but it still germinated!

"Wh-What should we do with this thing?" I stammered as I stared hard at the sprout. "It's probably going to wilt at this rate."

In a hushed, uneasy voice, Kon whispered, "I dunno..."

Techi approached us. She glanced at the altar and quirked an eyebrow. "Well, well. Impressive. You managed to germinate a Fusang tree without planting it."

I tilted my head in question. "Um, is it something to celebrate over?"

She nodded with a smile. "Indeed. They say it's a very good omen. Fusang seeds germinate without exception after being planted in soil, but folklore indicates that the quality of the owner's soul and good karma will germinate the seeds regardless of environment. But well, it's something like a superstition, so the logical explanation is that it happens by chance. Still, having such an accomplishment on your record boosts your reputation around here. You'd be hailed as a *fuku-otoko*, the luckiest man of the year like the ones we see on New

Year's TV specials."

"Huuuh... Okay, I understand that it's an auspicious thing, but what should we do about the sprout? I don't think planting the seed in our garden or orchard is a good idea."

Techi shrugged. "You can just put it in any random pot or bowl. Fusang trees need a vast plot of soil for them to grow to their maximum size, because they need to expand their roots to grow bigger. If you plant it in a small pot like a bonsai tree, it can't do that, so the resulting tree would be a miniature one.

"You can put it on display for a while as a lucky symbol before leaving it in the hands of the community association president when you feel like it. He'll take over and plant it deep in the woods, where it can grow without getting in anyone's way. The tree's life force is astounding—even if it stays as a small tree for a couple of years, it will still grow to full size after it's transplanted."

Her smile grew even broader as she gave me a couple of friendly smacks on the back. "Bravo, Mikura."

Though I had trouble keeping up with the sudden turn of events, since Techι said it was a good thing, I decided to go along with her suggestion.



THE eventful lunch break soon ended, and Techι and Kon returned to the orchard. After seeing them off, I left my home behind and made my way to the hardware store. It was about time I stocked up on daily necessities, and I figured I might as well buy a bonsai pot, a watering can, and leaf mold while I was there.

According to Techι, Fusang seeds didn't require fertilizer or special care. Any random soil would suffice. After pouring on enough water to gently moisten the surface of the soil, I could just leave it outside under the sun and allow nature to do its work. However, I was the type of person who liked to go the extra mile whenever I had a new task to do, so I was planning on using a good plant pot, rich soil, and relatively high-quality tools.

Upon finishing my shopping, I returned home and moved a wooden crate lying around to the side of the veranda. I placed the pot inside it and filled it

with leaf mold. Next, I retrieved the Fusang sprout, but not before I offered a silent apology at the altar. I buried it in a hole in the center of the leaf mold. Gently, I filled the hole and watered the pot.

All right, I think that's good enough. I nodded to myself. I stored the remainder of the leaf mold in the warehouse and put away the tools. With that task out of the way, I returned to my house, washed my hands, and resumed my endless battle against housework. I did the laundry, checked how dry the hanging washing was, made records of today's shopping list in the household account book, then checked the balance of my bank passbook.

As the day went by, a sudden thought occurred to me. *Hey, how about I start an observation diary about the Fusang seed—I mean, Fusang sprout?* With my phone in one hand, I walked over to the veranda and aimed my camera at the sprout. The sunlight was more dazzling in the afternoon, casting a golden sheen on the young leaves. I looked at my screen and focused my camera on the sprout.

My eyes widened. “What?!”

I used my naked eye to look at the sprout, then looked at the phone screen. I repeated that motion several times before rubbing my eyes.

Only moments ago, the sprout had been a tiny stalk with a crown of two leaves, as if it'd only just germinated. During the short time I'd taken my eyes off it, the stem between the twin leaves had stretched out and sprouted new leaves. Now, it looked more like a small shoot than a new sprout. It would've been normal if several days had passed, but that wasn't the case.

“T-Talk about fast...” I muttered to myself.

I really shouldn't have underestimated the legendary Fusang tree. It was otherworldly in both height and growth rate. *If it grows this fast, maybe I can see it grow in fast motion.* I continued to hold my camera up, waiting for the magic to happen.

Seconds ticked by. Half a minute ticked by.

No response.

Maybe it's done enough growing for today. Or is this as big as it can get in a

pot this size? I waited for another twenty or so seconds, but there didn't seem to be any visible change. I sighed in resignation and took a photo of its current state. *Hey, if I took several photos in succession, would it turn out like a stop-motion animation?* I tried that, but I had no luck. Wasting my afternoon away on the unbudging sprout wouldn't do me any good, so I put away my phone and returned to housework.

In the back of my mind, I started planning dinner. *We ate noodles for lunch, so should we eat rice instead? I'd love to make something with plenty of vegetables, and now that I know about the calorie problem... A salad with a generous amount of oil-based dressing and powdered cheese might do the trick. Oh, but plain rice doesn't go that well with salad in my opinion... Hmm, maybe curry, then?*

I can try subverting expectations by making the curry light and refreshing, while the salad will be heavy and rich. That would be fun. Now add on some fruit yogurt as a side, and I have a whole course. Actually, curry will be really helpful for managing the calorie count, since I can adjust the curry sauce itself and the amount of meat. Commercial curry roux tends to be rich and heavily seasoned, so mixing the spices myself and making homemade curry paste is something I can consider.

Oh, on that topic, I can make a curry-style food pill when I get around to making those. Mmm, I have the feeling it'll produce spectacular results. I should collect a variety of spices to prepare for Food Pill Day.

Time flew by, and gradually, heat ebbed away from the air. Stronger winds tugged at the leaves, and hearing the loud rustling reminded me of the Fusang shoot. *I should move the pot indoors soon. Maybe I can leave it at the house entrance or in the warehouse.* Thinking that, I walked over to the veranda.

I'd half-anticipated there to be a surprise waiting for me, so I wasn't as flabbergasted as the first time. However, I still had to pick my jaw off the ground.

The shoot had turned into a tree. The once straight, verdant stem was now a sturdy, crooked brown trunk. Numerous branches spread out from the trunk, and countless leaves decorated them like Christmas ornaments. The tree held

itself with dignity, like a masterpiece that a bonsai master had poured decades of blood, sweat, and tears into.

“This tree is no fun as an observational study project... It doesn’t do things step by step,” I grumbled as I took out my phone. I took another photo of it and compared the latest photo with the shoot from earlier.

...Wow. No one would believe me if I tried to tell them that only a few hours had passed between these two photos of the same plant.

But then again, it’s the legendary Fusang tree. Achieving the impossible is what it does best. It grows into a prodigious tree, and its very presence is enough to purify air. It encourages crop and animal growth inside the forest, and as if that wasn’t enough, it might have the ability to lengthen life spans. In ancient times, people even believed that it brought forth the rising sun every morning with its vitality. Compared to that, its stunning growth was a trifling matter.

I hummed in thought as I approached the tree and scrutinized it. “I wonder if you can purify the air even as a bonsai plant. Would you lengthen my life if I keep caring for you? Hmm... Maybe I should think about setting you down next to the window in my bedroom. That means I might get healthier during my sleep.”

From my perspective, I was addressing the Fusang tree, but a bystander would likely assume I was talking to myself. It was around the time that Techichi came back from work, and I should keep myself in check. I didn’t want her to think that I had a few screws loose.

Think of the devil and she shall appear, I heard the sound of footsteps immediately after I had that thought. I turned around and saw a slightly weary Techichi heading my way. Her eyes were on me, but her attention was immediately drawn to the plant pot right in front of me. She widened her eyes and gasped. Her mouth opened and closed, as if all the words she wanted to say were dying in her throat.

Hold on. Why is she surprised? Isn’t this meant to be normal for Fusang trees? Are you telling me that this isn’t how they’re supposed to be?

Techichi was speechless, and she continued opening and closing her mouth like a

goldfish. Finally, she found her voice. “M-Mikura?! What the... H-How did you make it grow so big?!” She pointed a shaky finger at the tree.

I’d anticipated such words after her speechlessness. Techī was an expert on Fusang trees, but even *she* was thunderstruck by this phenomenon. She turned her gaze to me, and I shook my head furiously, protesting my innocence. *I swear, I have no idea what happened, and I haven’t done anything special!*





AFTER the astronomical growth incident, Techī and I tested everything we could think of to pinpoint the cause, but we hadn't gotten any results. Since we were stuck at a dead end, we went to consult other people: Techī's parents, Kon's parents, and even Mr. Karashina, who'd given me the seed. Unfortunately, they were just as clueless as we were. Unwilling to give up, I asked Mr. Karashina about other experts on the matter, but even they couldn't make heads or tails of it.

In the end, the conclusion we arrived at was somewhat offhanded. Yes, it was a shocking event, but it wasn't doing any harm to anyone, so we should just move on and get on with our lives. It might have grown quickly, but it'd stopped growing at a set size and wasn't causing any trouble. Thus, I could pretend nothing had happened and treat it as a lucky ornament in my house.

After a couple of years, like Techī said, I would entrust it to Mr. Karashina's care. If I ever missed it, I could even pay a visit to the area where it had been planted. I didn't think I would be that attached to a tree that had abruptly shot up without my involvement—after all, it wasn't a real bonsai I'd spent my time and effort on. But having the option was nice.



THE next few days passed without incident. The Fusang tree didn't change my world as I knew it or make a dent in my life. Every day passed by peacefully.

Until Sunday arrived, that is.

I was ready. I had fully stocked up on everything we needed. Even Kon was here and ready for action.

Today marked the day we would embark on our journey to make canned food and food pills.

"As you know, we'll challenge canned food and food pills today!" I declared solemnly. Then, my stern expression broke into a smile. "But we don't have to be that tense. They're easier than sausages and are hard to mess up, so let's focus on perfecting the food until it suits our tastes like no other."

“Yes, sir!” Kon replied energetically.

I was wearing my apron, and he was in his coverall apron. I nodded dramatically, signaling the start of our mission. First, I took out the manual for the canning set and spread it out on the kitchen counter.

“We shall begin by going through the dos and don’ts of canned food. Generally, canned food involves filling a can with the ingredients and a packing medium—the seasoning liquid—sealing the lid properly, then cooking and sterilizing the contents by simmering the can. But be warned, not all food is suitable for canning.

“Some canning sets aren’t made for food at all, for example. Some might be safe to use with food but require you to avoid certain types of food and seasoning liquids that might corrode the can. If there is an internal coating in the can, I hear that you have to avoid some types of food that might not mix well with it. Before you use any sets or tools, you need to read the manual and instructions properly for your own safety.”

Kon nodded eagerly. “Okaaaay, gotcha!” He paused. “I never knew that cans for canned food have ‘coatings’ inside them. What are those?”

“I’m not that knowledgeable about them either, but if you touch the inside of a can when you’re washing it after use, you will feel a distinct smooth texture. It doesn’t feel like tin or aluminum, and that’s probably the coating.” I paused. “I’ve heard stories of people heating commercial canned food directly over a fire, but some canned food companies have issued official warnings against that. They say that the coating might melt, so they don’t recommend such a method. You would eat the food at your own risk.

“Apparently there isn’t any evidence saying that the coating might actually melt, or that the melted coating might be toxic. But food cans aren’t tailored for such a cooking method, so I guess the companies just prefer to be safe than sorry.” I cleared my throat, realizing I’d gone off-topic. “Anyway, that’s why you should read the instructions. They tell you how to use the tools and the warnings associated with canned food.”

“I see!” Kon quickly skimmed through the manual. “Hey Mikura, there aren’t that many banned things or don’ts on this list. That’s weird...” He squinted at it.

“Ah, that’s normal for canned food. Unless you do something crazy, the can and coating won’t corrode that easily. Even if it’s harder to mess up than not, however, it’s still important to read the manual carefully.”

We went through the manual page by page. Eventually, we ended up at the “How to make canned food” section. Together, we perused the text carefully.

The example recipe listed there was canned mackerel simmered in miso.

Cut fresh mackerel into chunks. Transfer into can. Pour in miso-based seasoning liquid until the can is full. Close the lid and attach the can to the can seamer with the large hand crank, as shown in the diagrams.

Once attached, fix the can in place. Use both hands to hold the crank and turn. After one revolution, spin the adjustment screw next to the crank for a set number of turns. Turn the crank again before spinning the screw once more. Repeat the process until complete.

The screw adjustments apparently have to do with the sealing method for canned food, making a double seam, or something like that. When seaming cans manually, you have to do some fine-tuning. I hear that machines in canneries can finish such tasks within the span of seconds. Sometimes, advanced technology seemed no different from magic.

“So yes, after seaming the can like this, you put it in a pot,” I said as we reached the end of the manual. “Pour in water and heat until everything inside is cooked. When ready, remove from pot and wait for it to cool. After it’s not that hot anymore, you can open the can with a can opener and dig in. Let’s make that our goal for now.”

Kon squeezed his eyes shut and smiled at me. “Okay!” But then, his eyes widened, and he tilted his head quizzically. “Wait... Huh? Mikura, it’s canned food! Why’re we eating them right away?”

“I like your can-do attitude, but remember what I said with sausages last time? Having a proper starter kit doesn’t turn us into professionals overnight. I don’t know whether we’ll be able to sterilize the cans perfectly, and we have no way of checking whether the food is safe to consume. Since we can’t pinpoint a proper expiration date, we can’t let it sit in our pantry collecting dust, either. But if we eat them on the day we make them, it’s essentially the same thing as

simmered food. If you want to enjoy homemade canned food safely, that's what I recommend."

"Oh..." His shoulders drooped. "Yeah, that makes sense. It might last a long time, but there's no point if we don't know how long... Even if we get a tummy ache from eating it, we had it coming."

"Exactly. It's a bummer to eat canned food right away, but it doesn't change the fact that we're eating what we make! Isn't that exciting?"

"*Super* exciting!" Kon exclaimed. His fluffy tail—which had lost a bit of volume since he was shedding into his summer coat—swayed happily. Exhilaration was radiating off him, and I could tell he was itching to get started.

I couldn't fight a fond smile on my face as I watched him. Opening the fridge, I took out the ingredients for the canned food and spread them out on the counter—sardines, mackerel, commercial sausages and bacon, and finally retort pouches of fruits preserved in syrup.

I'd prepared the last ingredient for Kon, who wanted to make canned fruit. Now, you may be wondering, why aren't I using fresh fruit? Fruit retort pouches are barely different from the contents of canned fruit, so what's the point?

Well, there are two reasons. The first is that there aren't any suitable fruits in season. The second is that when I made a prototype with fruits from the supermarket, it was nothing short of disaster. The taste was putrid, and the fruit crumbled into mush during the cooking process. No matter how I tried to salvage it, it didn't work.

That's why I fell back on this last resort. For some reason, using the fruit in syrup produces decent results. Maybe it's the syrup that matters—there might be a strict golden ratio of ingredients to make a good syrup, a trade secret closely guarded by professionals.

Next, I fetched the seasonings I would use for the flavorful packing medium, like soy sauce and miso paste. With everything ready, I rolled up my sleeves, scrubbed my hands thoroughly, and got to work.

The hardest part of making canned food is assembling all the ingredients and equipment. The rest is simple. Cut the ingredients and transfer into cans. Mix

seasoning to make the packing medium and pour into can.

The role of knife handler fell to me, while Kon valiantly prepared the seasoning liquid. We speedily made one can after another—mackerels in miso, sardines in miso, sausages in soy sauce, bacon in soy sauce, and finally fruit in syrup—for which we only transferred the contents from one vessel to another.

Setting up the can seamer was also my job. I attached cans to the can seamer and was on screw adjustment duty. Meanwhile, Kon was in charge of the very last step, turning the crank and making the double seam.

When the first can was in place, Kon struck an imposing pose in front of the device, his chin held high and his hands on his hips. He marched up to the machine, grabbed the large crank with both hands, and used his entire body to turn the crank. After one revolution, I adjusted the screw, and he turned the crank again. Like in the sample recipe, we repeated this process over and over.

The handle was more than fairly large for someone of Kon's stature, and it was strenuous work. Furthermore, he had to repeat the process five times for all our cans, and I was almost worried that his stamina would run out first.

"Grrraah!" he cried, panting heavily as he turned the crank. Nevertheless, joy never left his face.

The sense of accomplishment he got from making his own canned food and challenging a new task in cooking must be exhilarating. His eyes were wide and bright, and as I watched him, I suddenly recalled nostalgic memories from my childhood.

When I was a child, my parents would take me to all kinds of places during the weekends and holidays. Good examples were amusement parks, zoos, aquariums... For outdoor activities, we went camping, hiking, swimming in the ocean, and held barbecue parties. I also mustn't forget the art galleries, history museums, and science museums.

Back then, I would sometimes feel that these excursions were a chore. I whined like a baby, saying that I wanted to play games at home and go out with friends. Why were they taking me to all these weird places instead? But my parents ignored my protests and insisted on taking me to see the world and experience as many things as I could.

Now, as an adult looking back, I know that I have wonderful parents who dedicated their time to raising me with all their heart. I could never thank them enough.

The places I went and the experiences I gained didn't all come in handy. But they certainly didn't go to waste either after I joined society as a working adult—from time to time, they would shine and help me in unexpected ways. And they weren't just useful—they also enriched my life, teaching me how to enjoy and appreciate the beautiful side of the world instead of being trapped in a small shell.

As someone who was fortunate enough to have such a childhood, seeing a growing child like Kon made a fire of determination burn in my heart. I wanted him to experience all kinds of weird and wonderful things, just like I had.

I was well aware that I wasn't Kon's guardian, and I might be nosy, poking my nose into other people's business. But I still wanted to do what I could for him. *If this is what I'm like with Kon, I can't imagine what I'll be like with my own children...* At that thought, I finally understood what my parents had felt when they'd raised me.

Techi and Kon were beastfolk living in the Beastly Wilds, so I couldn't take them to see the ocean or faraway sights, but I hoped that I could at least help them experience everything possible within the forest, even indoor activities like cooking at home.

A cheerful voice cut into my thoughts. "Mikura! The last can is done!" Even from above his mask, I could tell that Kon was smiling brightly.

I snapped out of it and returned with a grin of my own. "Good work! It wouldn't have been possible without you!"

I retrieved the seamed cans and submerged them inside a pot of water, which I had prepared beforehand. Admittedly, it was a bit barbaric of me to simmer cans with different contents together in one go, but it wasn't like I had tools to help me manage the precise temperature for each one. That meant I would end up simmering them over the same heat, for the same amount of time. I might as well cook them together.

Once all five cans were inside the pot over the stove, I turned on the heat,

covered the pot with a lid, and set up the cooking timer.

“All right, all that’s left is to heat the cans until they’re cooked through.” I nodded to myself. “It’ll be a while before that happens, so let’s clean up the tools we used, get some rest, then move on to making food pills!”

Kon shut his eyes with a big smile and nodded. Together, we began tidying up. I did most of the work, since I wasn’t as spent as he was. Once the kitchen returned to its pristine state, I swiftly whipped up fresh cloudy lemonade, which had plenty of citric acid that sped up recovery from fatigue. We had a lot of eating planned, so I didn’t make any snacks. I moved into the living room with cups of lemonade in hand.

With my assistance, Kon changed out of his coverall apron and regained temporary freedom. We sat down on the floor cushions and felt the refreshing breeze from the garden brush our faces as it went. I sipped lemonade using a straw and relished in the irresistible sweet and sour taste.

“It’s sour, but it’s so nice!” Kon chirped. “It’s my first time drinking lemonade without bubbles!”

I blinked in surprise. “I know that you only eat Japanese food in your house, so I understand if you don’t have them at home, but you never had lemonade during outings?”

“Nope, never. Oh, on that topic! I’ve always wondered, but why does *ramune* sound so much like lemonade?”

“Huh? Uh... Hold on, give me a minute, let me think...” I hesitated. “I think I’ve researched this before, actually. The Japanese ramune is derived from the English word *lemonade*. At the beginning, ramune used to refer to carbonated drinks with lemon flavoring and sugar. The meaning changed over time, however, and now, ramune typically refers to any drink sold in a glass bottle with a glass marble. Due to consumer demands, there isn’t just lemon-flavored ramune. Grape, melon, strawberry... It’s kind of funny now that I think about it.”

“That’s so interesting! Ramune tastes nothing like the lemonade you make!”

After our cups were empty and our energy levels were recharged, we were ready to make the food pills. Just as I was about to get started, Techii appeared,

walking into the house through the veranda with heavy shopping bags weighing down both her hands.

The moment she saw me, she cast her eyes down awkwardly. “I think I bought too much again...”

I felt wistful—she’d said something similar the first time we’d gone shopping together. With a small smile, I said, “Welcome back home.” I accepted the shopping bags from her before heading to the kitchen to put our groceries down. Then, I made a new cup of lemonade for Techii.

Techii, meanwhile, went to wash her hands before she joined me in the kitchen. She started sorting through our groceries, storing them in the fridge and freezer. In the middle of that process, she took out a cylinder with some sort of yellowish powder and showed it to me.

“You mentioned you were going to make curry-flavored food pills, so I bought this.” She lifted it in front of my eyes. “They were passing out samples of chicken grilled with this powder on, and the taste was unforgettable. I ended up buying it on impulse.”

It turned out that the yellow powder was curry powder. I could definitely trust Techii’s choice, and I thanked her for her help. I accepted the container and scrutinized it, wondering what brand it was. The next moment, I saw a logo that everyone was familiar with when you looked for Japanese curry roux in the supermarket.

“What?!” I blurted out on reflex. “Vermont Curry?! The company that’s famous for their roux?! I-I never knew they sold curry powder!”

After the break, we helped Kon change back into his coverall apron before the three of us moved into the kitchen. Each of us prepared our own set of tools on the counter, such as mortars, pestles, and bowls, as well as a wide selection of ingredients. Soon, we would make food pills.

Like I mentioned before, the recipe for food pills is incredibly simple. Crush ingredients, roll into spheres, and cook by grilling, steaming, or whatever you prefer. The hard part was making it taste good, so we should invest our efforts into finding a good combination of ingredients instead of adjusting the method.

“I know that we’re all excited about the curry powder food pill,” I said, “but let’s start with a standard one so that we know what a plain one is supposed to taste like.”

The list of ingredients I reached for first were the following: rice flour, sweet rice flour, roasted soybean flour, buckwheat flour, and ground sesame. They were all the types you’d find in a supermarket, packaged in bags and ready to go. Technically, if I wanted to, I could make all of these by grinding the raw ingredients with mortar and pestle. Doing it manually, however, would take ages and result in uneven flour. That was why I prioritized convenience this time.

“After a quick browse of different recipes, I learned that there were apparently food pills made with only one type of flour,” I said. “But many people agree that using as many types of flour as possible is more nutritious, so let’s use everything we have here. Measure out an equal amount of each and mix them.”

I picked up a measuring cup and did exactly what I said, pouring the flour into my bowl. “For an authentic food pill, this is when you’d add Chinese medicine, but we’re amateurs. Without proper knowledge, it’s very easy to mess up and end up with undesirable side effects, so we won’t try it this time.” I paused dramatically. “Buuut, during my research, I found out that a few ingredients that we use for everyday cooking count as Chinese medicine as well, so I take that back! We’ll use those!”

Triumphant, I retrieved a few ingredients and laid them out on the counter.

“Yay!” Kon cheered.

“Yay,” Techii said, and I could hear the amusement in her voice.

The ingredients on the counter were rock sugar, cinnamon, Japanese mountain yam powder, and glutinous rice flour. They were truly ingredients we use all the time in cooking. As someone who grew up thinking that they were household ingredients, I found it kind of funny that during the age when food pills were still mainstream, they used to be hailed as beneficial herbal medicine.

When I finished arranging the ingredients, I said, “Some of these ingredients haven’t been powdered. Let’s take one of each and grind all of them with our

mortar and pestle. Once you turn them into fine powder, pour them into the mixing bowl.”

“Yes, Head Chef,” Kon and Techī chorused.

Harmoniously, the three of us began the literal grind. First was the rock sugar, and second were the cinnamon sticks. We didn’t use too much, just a little, which we did our best to grind into a fine powder before pouring into the bowl. Next, we added the mountain yam powder and the glutinous rice flour. With this, all the basic ingredients were in the bowl, so we poured in water and began combining the mixture with our hands.

If we wanted to be even more authentic, we should add some alcohol as well, such as cooking sake. But we have a minor here, and I don’t want any accidents to happen. Therefore, we have to skip this step.

Safety first is what I swear by. Though he isn’t drinking the alcohol directly, people sensitive to alcohol would feel drunk just from breathing it in. Even if the resulting pill wouldn’t taste as good, considering all the ingredients we’ve already added, it should be flavorful enough.

From what I found during my research, ninjas and samurai used to add Asian ginseng, licorice, adlay seeds, and lotus seeds as well. They’re all easily available, but misusing ginseng and licorice might have adverse effects on our organs. Once again, safety first.

Other than that, in certain regions, they liked to add dried fish or fish simmered in soy sauce, but I scratched those from the list because detailed recipes haven’t survived the test of time. I was also wary about how they would affect the taste.

“If it’s too dry, add some water and knead the mixture thoroughly,” I instructed. “Once everything is mixed properly, roll the dough into spheres. I’m planning on steaming our food pills today, so arrange them on the steamer cloth on this plate. Once everyone is finished, I’ll put the plate into the steamer pot that’s sitting on the stove, and the cooking will begin!”

“Okaaay!” Kon replied energetically.

“All right.” Techī nodded.

Thus began the part of the recipe where our character showed. My food pills were all nearly perfect spheres. Kon's pills were somewhat lopsided, because he was still only starting out as a chef. As for Techī, she used too much force when making the pills, so hers were dense—they looked stiff and squashed.

Uh... I mean, they're still edible, right? Our pills reflect our different personalities, and that should be a good thing...I think. We're steaming them this time, so a tiny bit of variation like this shouldn't be anything to sweat about... Please tell me I'm right.

The steaming process softened food and gave it a fluffy texture, unlike grilling or roasting. Though I was slightly worried about Techī's food pills, I convinced myself that everything was going to work out.

I rolled the remaining dough into spheres and transferred them to the steamer. After everyone was done, I turned on the stove.

Kon plopped down on the counter. "Mikura, do food pills take a long time too? Are we going to wait for half an hour or something?"

I shook my head. "No, it won't take that long. Well, we *will* have to wait for several minutes because we need to boil the water, but the ingredients used today can all be eaten raw. Once the steam fills the steamer and makes the pills nice and hot, they'll be ready. Food pills are definitely much faster than canned food. Oh, but they'll be scalding hot fresh out of the steamer, so we need to cool them first. That might take a short while."

Kon gave me his signature smile, but it felt slightly feeble. He was more exhausted by the grinding step than we'd expected. Seeing that, I gave Techī a meaningful look, signaling that it was her turn.

She readily stepped forward and coaxed Kon in a gentle voice. She lifted him up and moved into the living room. While I waited for the water in the steamer to boil, I made a new batch of lemonade and carried it over. Together, we enjoyed the lemonade during our brief respite. My eyes, however, were trained carefully on the steamer in the kitchen, keeping tabs on the amount of steam that seeped out.

When the steam seemed to be just right, I turned off the stove, lifted the lid, and unraveled the steamer cloth. At precisely that moment, a tantalizing aroma

expanded and permeated the kitchen. I didn't know how to describe it—it reminded me of the scent of freshly cooked rice, albeit a bit sweeter and more intense. Or perhaps, comparing it to the aroma of steamed glutinous rice would be closer.

It was a unique aroma, yet it also felt paradoxically homely and nostalgic. After having my fill of the wonderful smell, I started picking up the soft and fluffy steamed food pills. After moving all the food pills onto three individual plates, I headed back into the living room. A tantalizing aroma followed the plate wherever it went, and despite his fatigue, Kon was so thrilled that he looked as if he was about to start sprinting at any time. Techī's reaction wasn't as exaggerated, but her eyes were shining. She clearly couldn't wait to try some actual ninja food.

I laid out the three plates on the low table and made some tea. Together, we voiced our thanks for the meal before we picked up our respective masterpieces with our fingers and plopped them into our mouths.

The first layer of aromas that bombarded my senses was the almond-like scent of sesame and the nutty aroma of roasted soybean flour. I chewed once, and I could taste a mushy texture that I struggled to put into words. It was mushy, but also chewy and firm. The more I moved my jaw, the stronger the aroma grew, and an intense sweetness melted on my tongue. Other than sweetness, the rest of the flavors felt like a chaotic blend of a bit of everything, likely due to the many ingredients we used. *But hey, it's actually...*

"Not bad at all," I concluded. "In fact, it's *good*. I used to think that the food pills my mom made for me when I was a child tasted good because she made major changes to the original recipe for my sake, but I'm having second thoughts now. We followed the recipe relatively faithfully today, but it's still delicious."

I mean, it was a recipe for success from the beginning. A quick perusal of the ingredients will tell you that. The taste of different types of flour blends together harmoniously instead of clashing, and the sharp spiciness of cinnamon is almost perfect. The texture is admittedly unusual, but it's not off-putting. It makes me want to chew it over and over, like chewing gum.

Kon was the second to give his review. “It’s a bit like mochi...? Hmm, maybe sweet rice flour *dango*?” He chewed fervently. “A firm and fragrant dango... sesame dango?” He paused. “I know! Sesame *yatsuhashi* sweet dango! Mmm, I love it!” His acute sense of smell was likely picking up the individual scents of the ingredients.

The first impression of the food pill was a jumbled mix of countless flavors and scents. But the unique texture made you want to instinctively chew on it, and the longer you chewed, the clearer the flavors and aromas became. The moment of clarity was the moment you’d think, *Oh, this is tasty!*

After getting over the initial shock, the following food pills were much easier to snack on for Kon. He plopped one pill after another into his mouth.

Techi, meanwhile, took a small nibble of her food pill before staring at it intently. She took another nibble and started a second staring contest. She was almost like a video on loop.

She hummed in thought. “So this is the famous ninja field ration, food pills, huh? I had the impression that they seemed unsavory, but they’re better than I expected. Actually, during an era when sugar and spices weren’t as abundant, something sweet and tasty like this might’ve been considered a luxury, don’t you think? Did ninjas eat such rations on a daily basis? Was being a ninja so profitable that they could afford to eat such food during every mission...?”

Techi seemed to have gone into Ninja Researcher Mode. As she stared and contemplated about the food pill, I stared hard at her and stifled a chuckle.

“It’s hard to say whether they ate food pills during every mission,” I said. “The food pills are often depicted as field rations that preserved well, but in reality, they were convenient, yes, but they certainly didn’t last long. Even if you wrap them in leaves with antibacterial properties, like sasa bamboo leaves, it doesn’t make much of a difference.

“So then, you might be wondering, why in the world did they make food pills? This is just my own theory, but I think they exist to boost morale so that the success rates for rigorous missions would increase.”

I picked up a food pill and threw it into my mouth. I chewed thoroughly and swallowed, and as I savored the taste, I continued, “Like you said, Techi, they

might be luxurious delicacies that ninjas can only eat when they're on a grueling mission. The food pill is high in calories due to its ingredients, and the herbal medicine improves health as well. Therefore, it would make sense if they were offered as incentives to ninjas who had a long and tough journey ahead of them. Especially if these missions have dire consequences if they fail.

“As we can see from the recipe, a lot of sugar is used, such as rock sugar and honey. Such ingredients were invaluable during that era, so that further supports our theory that they are delicacies. The ninja might think, ‘I might die on this mission, but I’ll do everything I can to succeed and come home alive so that I can eat the tasty food pills again!’ Or something like that.”

Hearing that, Techii opened her mouth wide and ate an entire food pill. She savored it slowly before sipping on her tea and letting out a satisfied sigh. “I see. Your theory is sound. But if that’s the case, what did ninjas normally eat during missions, then? If they don’t eat food pills each time...” She paused. “Oh, and you also mentioned that food pills don’t preserve well. What if they go on a mission that lasts weeks or even months?”

“In that case...” I trailed off in thought. “I think they either prepared dehydrated food like the hoshii I mentioned last time, or they foraged for food on the go.”

Techii’s ears perked up. “Oh? Foraged?”

I nodded. “Japan is a fertile country. As long as you have the necessary knowledge, you can find food everywhere—in the mountains, the ocean, or even in rivers. Some may be weeds we pass by every day, some may be small critters living under rocks, and...some may even be the flesh of various animals that used to be considered taboo in the past. I think that ninjas used their knowledge and techniques to procure food from the strangest of places—food that normal people wouldn’t eat even during famines. Perhaps to ninjas, their best ‘field ration’ is their knowledge, techniques, and experience.”

Of course, snatching food from the enemies or purchasing food from merchants and local villagers were valid options as well. There should have also been a lot more methods up their sleeves, some perhaps even immoral or inconceivable to people in modern society. Who needed to weigh themselves

down with rations when food was everywhere?

Even hoshii would become bulky when there was enough, and the same rule applied to food pills, which were also expensive. Carrying around a substantial amount of food for a long mission would also be practically screaming, “I’m suspicious!” That wouldn’t be ideal, because ninjas were supposed to keep a low profile.

On top of that, during the period when ninjas were active, it was perfectly normal for travelers to replenish their food supplies in settlements and towns scattered across Japan, instead of packing everything from the beginning. Ninjas likely used such methods to avoid standing out.

I placed the last food pill in my mouth and savored the taste. “All that aside, after we finish eating the standard food pills, let’s try making the curry ones. We’ll cut down on the sugar so that it won’t clash with the curry flavor. I guess it might end up like curry mochi? Piping hot curry mochi...yum, I can’t wait.”

I paused. “To tell you the truth, I want to try a few other recipes too, but let’s stop at curry today. Food pills are high in calories and are filling. I don’t think we can stomach more than that.”

Techi and Kon nodded. Then, for some reason, they stood up and walked side-by-side into the garden.

Blinking in surprise, I asked, “Huh? Where you two going?”

Oddly enough, they flashed haughty, almost pretentious smiles at me before they retrieved their staffs and began martial training. They swung their staffs nimbly, swiftly, and fiercely. Something about their mannerisms, however, was a little different from usual as they flaunted their incredible agility.

I sipped my tea as I watched them. “Ah, I see. They want to train in the ninja style.”

For a while after that, I stared absentmindedly at the rampaging pair. I was growing more certain of my theory—ninja food pills were indeed nice incentives.

After the special Ninja Edition training session, we proceeded to make the curry-flavored food pills with the Vermont curry powder. I adjusted the

proportions of flour to heighten the chewy texture and decreased the amount of sugary ingredients while adding a substantial amount of curry powder. The mixture soon transformed into curry food pills—or rather, curry dango. The curry food pills were superb in taste as well. Thanks to the savory curry flavor, the pills felt more like a meal than a sweet treat.

As I ate, I thought about the curry food pill recipe and the changes I could make to it. *Since the curry flavor is overpowering, certain spices, ginger, and garlic would fit right in. If I pursue such a direction, the food pill might serve as a nice spice and nutrient pill.*

After our second helping of food pills, Techii and Kon resumed their Ninja Technique training. They hopped around the garden on light feet, pulling off spectacular maneuvers in the air. Perhaps thanks to the big calorie boost from the food pills, their movements were snappy, and they wielded their staves with more precision and agility than usual. *Huh. Maybe making food pills regularly will be enough to solve their calorie intake problem.*

Eating the same recipe over and over would skew their nutrient balance, but food pills didn't have that problem because they were made from a variety of ingredients. I could also experiment with all kinds of flavors to stop it from getting dull. Today, we made sugar and curry food pills, but a few other flavors I had in mind were matcha, soy sauce, miso, and so on. I could even make seasonal limited editions, such as cherry blossoms or seasonal fruits.

As long as I planned out a good food schedule while taking a balanced diet into account, I had the feeling that I would find great success. As ninja nerds, it would make Techii and Kon happy as well. *Yeah, it's a solid plan. I'll start tomorrow.*

The ringing of the cooking timer pulled me out of my thoughts. *Oh, right, I was also making canned food.* I headed to the kitchen and finished up the canned food while Techii and Kon continued their training.

The remaining steps weren't strenuous at all. I turned off the heat and took out the cans from the pot. With a towel, I wiped them clean and left them in a place with good ventilation to cool. Done. Once the food was cool enough to not burn our tongues, we would open the cans with a can opener and dig into

the goodies inside.

“Ah, wait, I should put the canned fruit somewhere else,” I muttered to myself after setting down the cans. “All the other canned foods are good as hot food, but warm fruits in syrup don’t sound very appetizing.”

Just in case, I put on oven mittens and picked up the canned fruit. We’d jotted down labels on each can with a pen, and I double-checked that it was the “fruit” can before moving it into the sink. I placed it in a small bowl and left it below the tap. I turned the tap ever so slightly, allowing the water to trickle onto the can. *That should help it cool down faster.*

This was when Techī and Kon, having finished their training, came into the kitchen. They must have gotten carried away after eating numerous food pills—they were even sweatier than their first training session, and they were covered all over in dirt and dust. I narrowed my eyes and pointed at the bathroom without saying a word. They headed in obediently.

I focused my attention back on the food. Canned food alone sounded a bit dreary, so I decided to make a salad. On daikon radish and mizuna, which served as the leafy greens, I sprinkled on *ume okaka*—pickled plum and bonito flakes with soy sauce. I transported the salad, cans, and the can opener onto the low table. I also prepared tableware and chopsticks. Now that the table was set, I only had to wait for Techī and Kon’s return.

A few minutes later, the pair returned in fresh clothes after a shower.

“All right, then. Kon, would you like to have the honor of opening the cans?” I handed the can opener to him.

I rarely use can openers nowadays. Most modern cans come equipped with some sort of convenient opening mechanism. As a result of that, I hear that a surprising number of people don’t know how to use can openers. Perhaps this knowledge was completely useless, but I still taught Kon about the device just in case he ever needed it during an emergency. As I showed him how to use the can opener, I gave him a quick lecture on leverage.

After the theory lecture, it was time for practice. He was holding the can opener, and I moved behind him to guide him through the process. I helped him dig the blade into the can and turned the knob three times. Then, I let Kon take

over.

With bright eyes, Kon moved the can opener merrily. His pace increased by the second, and he was so absorbed that he let out a “Yippee!” as he opened one can in the blink of an eye.

“Ah, stop there, Kon,” I hurriedly interrupted him. “Don’t cut out the whole lid.”

“Why’s that?” He stopped moving. Tilting his head quizzically, he pointed at the last stretch that connected the can and lid. “We’re supposed to take off the lid, aren’t we?”

The corners of my lips raised at his adorable gesture. I asked him to hand over the can opener, and I wedged it between the lid and the can. I used it as a lever to lift the lid, which was barely attached to the can.

“If you cut the whole thing out, it will fall off and sink into the seasoning liquid,” I explained. “It will be really tough to take out, so you want to leave a small segment like this and push the lid up. Also, be careful. The rim of the lid and can are jagged and sharp after you cut them, so you might get hurt if you touch them.”

Kon leaned forward and inspected the can lid and opening. “I see!” He nodded profusely. Then, he turned his gaze downward at the contents of the can—at the inviting, fragrant mackerel in miso seasoning liquid. The mackerel was cooked through, and the seasoning had seeped well into its flesh, giving it a beautiful sheen.

Hearing his audible swallow, I pointed to the remaining cans, reminding him that he wasn’t quite done yet. More delicious food was waiting for him.

Realization dawned on his face, and after I handed him the can opener, he assumed a dignified pose, like a samurai standing at the ready with his katana. Then, he began his attack on the remaining cans.

A few minutes later, opened cans lined up neatly in a row, hot air rising from the contents. They’d been cooled, so they weren’t quite at the level of steaming, but they weren’t completely cold either—they were just right. I piled all the savory canned food into one large bowl—in went the sardine, mackerel,

bacon, and sausage before I divided the pile into thirds. Last but not least, I divided the canned fruit into three separate glass plates.

Armed with chopsticks, the three of us reached for the food immediately.

As always, I was the first to provide commentary. “Mmm, not bad. The flavor is a bit rustic since we simplified the steps, but I think it’s better than normal commercial canned food. Maybe that’s because it’s fresh out of the pot.”

“Yuum!” Kon exclaimed. “The sausages are so hot and soft! Wow!”

Techi hummed in thought. “It tastes like standard stew or simmered dishes. I agree, it tastes better than commercial canned food. I suppose that’s the gap between homemade and factory-made, huh?”

Completely immersed in the food, all three of us moved our chopsticks without another word. The fish and meat were tender, and the fact that the seasoning hadn’t seeped in all the way actually worked out in its favor. The mild taste was very welcome. Normal canned food contains a generous amount of salt to extend their shelf life, so that might be part of the reason we were so delighted by our homemade ones.

Techi said, “If we could preserve the canned food properly, it would be perfect. But...I guess that’s a tall order for a novice?”

I nodded firmly. “Yeah. Food poisoning is something we have to watch out for, and the issue with cans is that, unlike glass jars, we can’t observe the contents. It also becomes expensive in the long term, especially the cost of the cans, which adds up. That’s why very few people take this up as a long-term hobby. Unless you have a good role model or a teacher of some sort with more experience and knowledge, you don’t know what and when you might mess up. And messing up on canned food might cause you to end up in the hospital.

“Therefore, eating commercial canned foods is probably our best bet,” I concluded. “The case is different for popular preserves like bottled food or umeboshi, because there are a lot of anecdotes to refer to for both success and failure. You know what to be careful about, the exact risks, and how to salvage your products when you fail. Unfortunately, canned food doesn’t go in that category.”

Techi nodded. “Interesting. So all the preserves we have nowadays—no, all the cooking in the world is built on a foundation of numerous successes and failures.” She paused. “Hm, chestnut and walnut farming is similar, so I suppose that’s just life.”

“Well said. Like I just mentioned, making canned food also isn’t cost-efficient. It’s fine to do it once or twice for fun, but cans are expensive, the ingredients are expensive, and the gas bill for simmering the cans can become expensive in the long term... We can’t beat the factories, which are optimized for efficiency from head to toe.”

“I see, even if you take out the labor fee, the cost is still a world apart. Not to mention that there are plenty of other delicious ways of cooking fish and meat. In the end, doing standard cooking whenever you want to eat is better than finding ways to preserve canned food, hm?”

While Tech and I had an intriguing conversation, Kon was single-mindedly scarfing down fish and meat. After he polished off his plate, he drank some tea to reset his tastebuds before he turned to his next target—the fruits.

Unlike the other cans, I barely did anything with the fruits other than moving them into a new vessel and reheating them. In fact, the taste should have dropped in quality because of the reheating process, but Kon sported a wide smile as he dug in ecstatically. What he savored wasn’t the actual fruit, but the experience of eating the proverbial fruits of his labor. He was truly a little ball of sunshine—somehow, he was always earnest and could find joy in every moment of his life, especially when food was involved.

Learning from his example, I also devoted all my attention to the canned food before me and got my chopsticks moving. Once my plate was empty, I let out a sigh and sipped some tea, relaxing after the meal.

I was rubbing my belly and enjoying a nice breeze from the garden when a sudden thought occurred to me. “Oh, right. I think I found the solution for your calorie intake, you two. I’m considering making food pills in all kinds of flavors, and you can use them to replenish your energy. Of course, I’ll continue exploring other options, and if you two have any requests, I will do everything within my power to fulfill them. But for now, I’m thinking of centering our

strategy around food pills. How does that sound?”

The pair’s expressions provided all the answers I needed. Techii was staring at me as if I’d just announced that Christmas came early while Kon closed his eyes in his wonderful signature smile. *I can tell that their passion for ninjas is the real deal.*

Well, there are plenty of ninja fans on the other side of the border and overseas. Openly expressing your passion for what you love and enjoying it to the fullest is a good thing. They showed full support for my preserve hobby, and I want to do the same.

Unfortunately, I can’t offer too much help. I only know how to make food pills. Other than that, I’m clueless about ninjas... When my thoughts arrived at food pills, I suddenly realized that plums would soon be in season. Perhaps diligently doing plum work was a way I could show them my support.

Umeboshi preserves well and has such strong antibacterial properties that simply putting one in your lunchbox would delay spoilage. It’s filled with plenty of citric acid that helps you restore stamina, as well as salt—almost *too* much salt. In a way, umeboshi is the crystallized wisdom of our ancestors.

Naturally, umeboshi was popular among ninjas as well. They’d add them to food pills, and they’d even invented the thirst-quencher pill with umeboshi as the main ingredient. *I think I’m onto something here.*

One could argue that plums represent the Japanese preserve culture. They were wonderful fruits that one could write an entire book about, and the list of their practical uses is endless. Umeboshi can be eaten straight, or chopped and transformed into plum sauce, or used as a seasoning for fish or meat stew, and they’re irreplaceable in onigiri and lunchboxes. Plum can be transformed into juice, jam... The list goes on.

Furthermore, they’re even delicious and nutritious. They also hide a darker side—eating too many unripe plums is said to have adverse effects on the human body, and I find that contradiction fascinating.

Just thinking about the flavor of plums made my mouth water.

This was when Techii and Kon, having finished their tea, stood up as if to

announce that break time was over. Wearing dignified expressions, the pair marched into the garden again and resumed their ninja-style training. *They're full of spirit, huh?* I thought, content with my status as a bystander.

But then, as Techī skillfully parried Kon's attack, she yelled, "Mikura! Get off your bum and exercise! You're a human who needs fewer calories, but you ate the same amount as we did! Come over and get moving, unless you want to turn plump and round!"

I...couldn't argue against those words. I rubbed my inflated stomach—I'd indeed eaten a little too much today. With a small sigh, I stood up and dragged my feet into the garden. "Heading there!"

Techī used her staff as a vaulting pole to launch herself into the air. In midair, she did an elegant front flip and thrust her staff forward with the same agility she had on the ground, as if gravity were nothing but fictional words on a page.

The two beastfolk flaunted their incredible physical prowess, and I couldn't help but say, "Just a reminder, but I can't pull off such acrobatic stunts like you guys!" I reached for the staff I'd stored beneath the veranda deck, did some quick warm-up exercises, then joined in.



THE next day was a Monday, signaling the start of a new week. I'd overextended myself yesterday, since I'd kept the hyper pair of Techī and Kon company. My entire body was sore, but I somehow managed to drag myself out of bed. After breakfast, I forced my aching body to move and do the chores as usual.

I was interrupted by Mr. Kaōin's voice ringing out from the entrance. "Hello, I have a delivery for you."

If this were any other day, I would have gone to the front door immediately, but my entire body was protesting in pain. I gave in to the temptation of laziness, and, though I knew it was somewhat impolite, I poked my head into the veranda and called out to him. "Apologies, but could you bring the packages here, please?"

Mr. Kaōin didn't have a single shred of impatience on his face as he made his

way to the veranda. He left my packages there, but the last items he had for me were quite special—three hardcover books with gorgeous cover designs that reminded me of graduation albums. He placed them gently on the veranda.

“Here are the dress pamphlets as promised,” he said with a warm smile. “If you skim through it today and contact me about your requests tomorrow or the day after, the dress will be ready before my delivery on the next Monday.”

He then explained that the extra two copies were for Techī’s friends if they were interested. Even married beastfolk would have the longing to decorate themselves in a beautiful dress, after all. Though they couldn’t go back in time to wear it during their weddings, they could still take photos and make memories.

He said that we had a special discount for up to the same number of orders as the pamphlets—in other words, three dresses. He hoped that interested parties would choose a dress they would be happy with and place orders. I could hear the sincerity in his voice.

My first reaction was surprise. In practice, the dress we were “renting” was more of a custom-made one, but he was still willing to offer us a discount.

He saw the confusion on my face, and with a small smile, he explained, “If Miss Kurikara and other beastwomen wear these dresses for beastfolk to their weddings or take photos, I’m certain that many of their kin will bear witness. More beastfolk will be interested, and the boutique will receive more orders. A snowball effect, you could say. As a boutique that essentially has a monopoly over the market, this is a chance many corporates would dream of. Please consider the discount as our commission fee, if you will.”

More companies might eventually join the fray. Beastfolk might start a boutique of their own in the Wilds. However, there was currently no competition in the market, and it was a great business opportunity since there should be a lot of unfulfilled demand.

I nodded, accepted the pamphlets, and thanked him. Inside the house, I started preparing some tea to entertain my guest. But out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that Mr. Kaōin, who was sitting on the veranda, was wearing an uncharacteristic expression of astonishment on his face. His gaze was fixed in

one direction.

I was handling hot water, and I couldn't afford to get distracted. For now, I focused on brewing tea.

When that was done, I fetched some sweets to go with the tea and went back to the veranda. "Please have some," I said.

Then, I followed his line of sight. He was looking at a simple rack I'd set up in the garden—I'd bought it at the hardware store, and it was for displaying flower and plant pots. A small bonsai pot was the lone resident on the rack, and a petite Fusang tree stood tall and strong inside it, holding up its lush emerald leaves. Judging by his reaction, Mr. Kaōin must know about the existence of Fusang trees. He was probably taken aback by the fact that someone had turned the Fusang tree into a bonsai plant, of all things.

"Oh, are you intrigued by the tree over there?" I asked. "A seed I received from the community president germinated, you see, and it grew into that size in the blink of an eye. On sunny days, I leave it outside so that it can get some sun."

Mr. Kaōin collected himself and maintained a calm exterior as he shifted his gaze to me. He thanked me then sipped the tea I brewed. His gaze was drawn back toward the bonsai pot.

"I shall be frank," he said slowly. "For decades, researchers have attempted to find ways to cultivate such trees. An impressive number of personnel and money have been poured into this project, and research continues to this day. Alas, there has been no progress. The seeds would only grow mold instead of sprouts. I admit that I'm having trouble believing a human managed to nurture that tree successfully. It may be the size of a bonsai tree, and you may be in the Wilds, but it is still astonishing."

I was about to relay the information Techī had given me about the seeds, but I snapped my jaw shut and held my tongue. The so-called information was more of an urban legend than fact. Perhaps mentioning it wouldn't do any harm, but I didn't want to say anything without Techī's permission. I fell silent, trying to decide the best course of action.

Fortunately, Techī arrived to save the day. She was walking over from the

orchard. Though it was rare for her to come back at this time of day, it wasn't the first time. Seeing my savior, I picked up a pamphlet and climbed to my feet. I sprinted over to her, updated her about the pamphlet, then asked her in a hushed voice whether I could share the condition for germinating Fusang seeds.

A radiant smile lit up her face as she accepted the pamphlet. In a low voice, she whispered, "Do what you want. It's just a rumor." She then told me that she would return to the orchard right away after she dealt with her business at home.

We parted ways, and I ran back to Mr. Kaōin. Hesitantly, I said, "Mr. Kaōin, there is something I wish to tell you about the method for germinating the Fusang seeds. I can't promise that my information is accurate, but I hope it might help. Miss Techī, the one who informed me, said that it's just a rumor, so please keep that in mind. Apparently, the seed will germinate if its owner has done many good deeds. In the Wilds, such an owner will be hailed as the luckiest person of the year under divine protection."

I paused. "I honestly haven't done that many good deeds in my life. Until the moment the seed germinated, it was enshrined on the Buddhist altar dedicated to my great-grandfather, and it's somewhat unclear who the owner is in this case, but it might give the researchers inspiration."

Mr. Kaōin's eyes widened. He shut his eyes briefly, let out a shallow exhale, and looked up at the sky. "Good deeds..." He took a sip of his tea. "Indeed, that is a convincing theory. Someone of my occupation and researchers lead lifestyles that have nothing to do with good karma. Perhaps it is only natural that our seeds will not germinate no matter how much effort we invest."

He cast his gaze down. "On the other hand, that guy... Pardon me, Tomiyasu has always taken care of children, and when he was dragged into the Great Disaster, he did everything he could to help others. After that calamity, he even donated and supported reconstruction projects, and if you head down to the town at the foot of the mountain, you will see his name engraved everywhere."

Mr. Kaōin let out a self-deprecating chuckle, and sorrow weighed heavy on his features. "Good deeds, huh?" he repeated. "If that is true, it was rather silly of us to use science and agriculture as weapons to challenge a mystical plant that

dates back to an era where gods walked among men. Many might reproach us for wasting our time and resources on a futile endeavor.”

I didn’t let my rational mind speak for me. Instead, I chose to obey the calling of my heart. “I don’t think it was futile. It’s because you did so many experiments that you figured out that such methods wouldn’t work. We still don’t know whether the rumor about good deeds is true. It might be due to geological reasons instead. I’m quoting from memory, but someone once said, ‘I have not failed. I’ve just found ten thousand ways that won’t work.’ The mistakes you make will pave the way to success for those whom you pass the torch on to.”

Taking a deep breath, I continued, “I’m willing to bet that my great-grandfather couldn’t have led the peaceful life he had without the efforts of you and your comrades. That’s the case for my current life as well. As a result of your protection, I’m here today, telling you the rumor about good deeds. Perhaps you actually took the shortest route to the correct answer.”

His usual kindly smile returned to his face, and he stared up at the heavens. With a small thud, he put down the yunomi teacup and turned to face me. “Thank you. Hearing that means a lot to me, and I feel like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders.” He paused. “Apologies, but there’s something I wish to talk about with an old friend. May I pray at the Buddhist altar, please?”

“Yes, of course!” I nodded. “Please light some incense for him as well.”

Mr. Kaōin took off his shoes and stood up unhurriedly. He turned to face the prayer alcove and headed there step by step, his gait steady and determined.

Side Story: Techī's Tail

ON one fine evening, I was lounging in my room after dinner and a bath, ready to fall into the lap of sleep at any time, when Techī called out to me in a soft, tender voice. "Mikuraa, do my taaail."

"Sure. I'm in my room, come right in," I called back.

I heard the flopping of Techī's slippers as she moved. Moments later, the sliding screen opened. Techī walked in, clad in her pajamas and with a brush in one hand.

Tails are special to beastfolk. That's why Techī is always diligent about her tail grooming, and she extends that care to Kon as well. She's extremely fussy about the tools and products she uses—she has a dedicated brush, a dedicated fur dryer, and even a dedicated tea seed oil. They don't come cheap, but she's willing to fork up the money.

However, trying to care for your tail by yourself is no easy feat. Since it grows out from your rear, you can't get a good view or reach certain areas. There are tools that have been designed to lower the difficulty, such as specialized brushes with long handles, or brushes fixed in place, which you press your tail against and move your body instead of the brush. But they aren't perfect.

Which means that if you wanted to seek the perfection that your gorgeous tail deserves, you need help. I hear that there are even beauty salons specifically for tails. Most of the time, though, the job will fall to your closest family members—your parents, lover, or spouse, but mostly your parents. Apparently, asking someone to take care of your tail is no different from asking them to pamper you and shower you with affection.

According to Techī, whenever I groomed her tail, she would feel as if she were a child again as she recalled her memories of her parents doing the same. In her case, even her speech becomes childlike as she basks in her blissful memories with my mother-in-law.

In other words, a request to groom her tail is Techī's way of expressing that she wants me to fawn over her and pamper her like a princess. Judging by her soft voice earlier, she'd already lowered all her walls and had melted into a puddle of cuteness, eagerly waiting for me to spoil her rotten.

We'd chosen to live in separate bedrooms because that'd seemed like the most pragmatic choice considering our differing lifestyles. But that didn't mean we never entered each other's private quarters—whenever Techī wanted me to groom her tail, she would always step across that invisible boundary.

I pulled myself out of my thoughts and said gently, "Okay, could you take a seat on the floor cushion over there?"

She sat down, facing her back to me. I accepted the brush from her and reached for the bottle of tea seed oil that was a permanent ornament on the desk in my room. Then, carefully and meticulously, I began grooming Techī's tail.

I placed a heavier emphasis on areas that were especially difficult to tend to, like the base of the tail instead of the tip. Techī was hugging her knees as she allowed me to work my way through her tail, and she started leisurely swaying her body. She hummed a tune, and her humming was different from her usual, more candid tone.

Hearing her mellow voice, a wave of nostalgia washed over me. Perhaps we'd shared such moments when we were children as well. There were many missing pieces of my childhood memories, but from time to time, I would suddenly grasp the fragments of the days gone by, just like this. I was sure that I would continue to piece together the puzzle bit by bit, and eventually, I might recall everything. At least, I certainly hoped so.

I finished tending to her tail base and slowly worked my way up toward the tip. I combed through her fur with the brush, gently smeared on tea seed oil, then combed again to work the oil into the deeper parts of her tail. Smearing the oil was a balancing act, according to Techī—not too much, not too little. She preferred a faint luster that was barely noticeable.

When I finished grooming all the way to her tail tip, Techī spoke up. "All right, your turn now, Mikura," she declared in an animated voice that was somewhat

rare for her.

In my opinion, I didn't need such pampering, but I didn't want to say "no" after seeing the cheerfulness on her face, so I nodded meekly. I turned my back to her and sat back down.

Humming a merry tune, Techī began grooming my hair. Then, in a subdued voice that sounded like it came out subconsciously, she muttered, "Your hair used to be soft when you were a child, but it's all prickly now."

It seemed that I wasn't the only one who'd reclaimed a fragment of our childhood memories. Judging by what she said, she must have tended to my hair when we were children. Though I struggled to summon up the details of such memories, the soft strokes of the brush on my hair felt familiar.

For a long while after that, we both fell into comfortable silence, allowing time to trickle by peacefully. After what felt like twenty minutes or so, she finished my hair treatment. With muffled thuds, the brush and tea seed oil gained a place on the table.

Then, in the stillness of the night, I heard a ruffle of cloth, and I felt a soft, warm body press against my back—Techī had thrown her arms around me, locking me inside a comfy embrace.

Surrounded by the fragrance of camellia seeds, we were reluctant to part that night until we could no longer fight the drowsiness weighing down our eyelids.

Afterword

AND there you have it, volume three. I can't believe that we made it all the way to the third book! This wouldn't have been possible without your warm support. Thank you so very much!

This time, I would like to share a few stories about the names of our main cast.

Let's start with the protagonist, Mikura. I took inspiration from Mishine-no-Mikura, the deity of warehouses. The "Mikura" here consists of two kanji: "mi" is a prefix we use to indicate a sacred status or great respect, while "kura" literally means warehouse. Traditionally, Japanese people store freshly harvested rice and preserves in warehouses. Because of that association, Mishine-no-Mikura is considered a deity of preserved foods and even food itself.

Next up is our heroine Tokatechi Kurikara. The kanji for her surname, Kurikara, literally translates to "chestnut pattern," a fitting name for a chipmunk theme. However, I actually took inspiration from Dragon King Kurikara, one of the Japanese aliases for the deity Acala, also known as Fudō in Japan. To us, he is an immovable guardian and a god of war.

As for Kon, whose full name is Konshironushi, his name is inspired by Kotoshironushi. The deity is said to be "the god who knows," thus earning his title as a god of oracles. There are stories about how he indulged in his hobby of fishing, and he is also seen as a god of fishing, harvest, and trade. Because of that, people eventually associated him with Ebisu, one of the Seven Gods of Luck, and Kotoshironushi gained his status as a god of luck as well. I chose this name for Kon, because he is someone who brings good fortune to the main characters.

There are a lot of elements taken from Japanese mythology and Buddhism scattered throughout the series—the Fusang trees are a good example. I originally wrote the series with a Japanese audience in mind, so I didn't add too much exposition within the main text, thinking that my readers could make the

association by themselves. But that would be rather thoughtless for the English version, which is why I decided to include an explanation about their names here.

There will be more uniquely Japanese elements in the future as well, and I would like to expand on them inside the text or in the Afterword so that my readers can have a comfortable reading experience!

And of course, when speaking of uniquely Japanese elements, we mustn't forget about ninjas. When I was a child, I was obsessed with ninjas. I did a lot of research and went to visit ninja villages. As I learned more about ninjas, I slowly realized that unlike what I initially assumed, the historical ninjas were more like special operations forces than spies, who placed a greater emphasis on obtaining confidential information.

Ninjas were a pragmatic and efficient group that specialized in undercover operations and sabotage. They were apparently infamous during the Warring States Period, loathed by many, and in my opinion, they deserved that reputation. Put yourself in the shoes of their enemies—there's a group out there that regularly disguises themselves as civilians and merchants, and they infiltrate key locations to commit arson or sabotage. Now, imagine you're playing a business simulation game or a war strategy game where there are regular facility destruction events you can never prevent. I'd be so stressed that I'd drop the game altogether.

But that was the reality for the warlords. Their territory and people, which they cherished and protected, were the ones who suffered the most after such sabotage. I would actually be surprised if people didn't despise ninjas back then.

In a twist of fate, however, ninjas are now loved by people from all over the globe...and by me, which is why they will continue to make cameo appearances here and there.

Like I just mentioned, ninjas were pragmatic, which is why they dedicated an astounding amount of resources to research and development to increase their effectiveness. As we saw in this book, they were excellent at making preserves, as well as procuring food no matter where they went. There are a lot of stories

about the incredible knowledge of ninjas left in records, and I hope to incorporate bits and pieces into my future work. And I certainly have plans for that in the next volume.

That's all from me. I hope to see you again in volume four!

Fuurou

Early Autumn, 2022



Rising from Ashes: My Dear Emperor, You're Putty in My Hands!

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When Sai reincarnates into an otome game as an NPC destined to die, she's saved by the winged Orient Emperor who shares a similar fate! How'll they rewrite their story?



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By Kosuzu Kobato illust Yuichi Murakami

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Margaret's life is cut short when she gets into a fatal accident at her workplace, except instead of the afterlife, she finds herself in another world!



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